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ABSTRACT

This monograph explores current trends in the literature on school reform, dropouts, effective schools, and successful practices in the middle grades in order to create a framework for thinking about dropout prevention at the intermediate level. Literature reviewed in Chapter 1 suggests that the dynamics of dropping out involve the relation between school responses and student characteristics. School policies and practices which may communicate rejection to vulnerable students are noted. Research reviewed in Chapter 2 suggests that consciously designed alternatives can increase schools' holding power for vulnerable students. Chapter 3 suggests that lessons from effective middle schools may offer new directions in dropout prevention and guide middle schools in making decisions that will help students succeed. Schools can assess their structures, policies, and practices to determine whether they are enhancing or hazardous for the education of vulnerable students. Chapter 4 which focuses on dropout prevention at the middle level, identifies components of preventive strategies and principles designed to guide prevention efforts. Chapter 5 offers recommendations for improving school holding power at the local level, and Chapter 6 presents conclusions. About 150 references are cited. A checklist for middle grade dropout prevention is appended. (RH)

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Before It's Too Late

DROPOUT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

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Before It's Too Late

DROPOUT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

A Report by the
Massachusetts Advocacy Center
and the
Center for Early Adolescence

July 1988

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The Center for Early Adolescence works to increase the effectiveness of schools, agencies, and individuals who have an impact on the lives of 10- to 15-year-olds. A broad-based, interdisciplinary orientation makes the Center a unique national resource for the country's many youth- and family-serving professionals. Now in its tenth year, the Center is a national advocate for young adolescents, seeking greater attentiveness to the age group and voicing concerns on its behalf. Dedicated to helping policy-makers and service-providers understand early adolescence, the Center serves as a clearinghouse for information on the age group and trains professionals and volunteers to work with 10- to 15-year-olds.

Founded as the Task Force on Children Out of School in 1969, the Massachusetts Advocacy Center intervenes on behalf of children before state and local bodies which legislate, regulate, and deliver human services to children in Massachusetts. The Center's central commitment has been to ensure that the most vulnerable children in Massachusetts receive services to which they are entitled. The Center employs a wide variety of advocacy strategies, including report writing, monitoring, negotiating, case advocacy, coalition-building, and litigation to close the gap between legal entitlements and actual service delivery in the fields of education, child welfare, children's health, and juvenile justice.

Foreword

This paper is a joint effort of the Center for Early Adolescence in North Carolina and the Massachusetts Advocacy Center, a child advocacy organization based in Boston. Both organizations have devoted considerable time, energy, and resources toward promoting school reform that could result in equitable, high-quality education for our nation's children. We draw here on our collective practical and research experience in the struggle to achieve that goal for the benefit of our most vulnerable students in the early adolescent years.

We submit this report to the reader with a firm sense of optimism that positive, constructive approaches to middle grades reform and the possibility of reducing the national dropout rate do exist. We believe we can make our dream of schools that work come true in middle grades schools through bold, creative, and cooperative action taken by all members of the educational community. And when we refer to the educational community, we mean parents, teachers, administrators, students, and public officials, all of whom have a part to play in creating schools that both challenge and nurture our young adolescent students.

The stakes are quite high for our next and ensuing generations, high in economic terms both for individual children and for the nation. That case has been made. The stakes are quite high for professional educators whose performance has been the subject of searching and searing criticism. And the stakes are quite high for communities, many of which see more children on the street than they do children attending class.

For us the stakes are highest for the children themselves who deserve our best efforts in providing them the skills, opportunities, and perspectives to participate in a life that is personally and economically rewarding. Our point here is that we know enough to begin the effort, and we know it makes sense to begin before it is too late for the children who need us most. Failure to do so will not so much demonstrate a lack of will but a conscious refusal. That is unacceptable.

Stephen R. Bing
Executive Director
Massachusetts Advocacy Center
June, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s the United States has witnessed a resurgence of intense interest in public education. Fueled by a perception of declining quality of schooling in America, renewed attention to public education has resulted in a variety of reports highlighting the presumed failure of the nation's schools to prepare the younger generation to maintain American prestige and economic well-being in the years to come. Cries of alarm from one set of critics have been coupled with calls for reform, and states and local school districts across the country have responded by applying tougher standards to many aspects of education ranging from teacher certification to school entrance and graduation requirements. Such reforms are necessary, critics claim, to reintroduce excellence into public schools.

Following closely on the heels of the excellence reformers, however, has come a second set of critics who insist that excellence without equity is no excellence at all. These critics raise concerns that the excellence movement has placed vulnerable students at even greater jeopardy of failure by raising standards without concurrently establishing structures to help all students reach those standards. According to this second wave of reformers, the costs of the excellence reforms, both to the excluded children and to society as a whole, are unacceptable. They maintain that tougher schooling is not necessarily better schooling and insist that excellence in education must also attend to issues of equity.

Parallel to the widening debate over school reform has been a heightened awareness of the problem of school dropouts. High dropout rates, in part a result of the excellence reforms, have led researchers to review a wealth of data about the characteristics of school dropouts themselves. In the wake of such studies, researchers have also begun to pay increasing attention to the characteristics of the schools such students attend. As a result, while the reform reports of the early 1980s scarcely mentioned the needs of vulnerable students, literature of the mid-80s is replete with references to "students at risk" and has increasingly highlighted programs to address their needs.

Two other movements in education inform current discussion of public education. Literature of the effective schools movement has offered significant insights into characteristics of elementary schools which successfully teach all students regardless of socioeconomic status. In addition, a growing body of literature related to the middle grades is beginning to extend the understanding of successful school practices into the arena of education for young adolescents.

These recent trends in educational research and public policy provide the backdrop for this perspective on dropout prevention in the middle grades. We come to this perspective from our concern for the most vulnerable children in our public schools, but we believe that school reforms designed to benefit these children will also strengthen schooling for all children. In this belief we stand squarely with those reformers who insist that any definition of excellence must encompass goals of fairness and equity to improve the education of students who are especially vulnerable because of their economic or social background. Without an education, such children find themselves at even greater disadvantage and have even more dramatically reduced chances for success in life.

We also stand squarely with those who insist that good schools themselves are the most compelling reason for students to resist dropping out. While promises of jobs or scholarships upon graduation are important incentives for young people who are frequently all too pessimistic about their life options, it is the daily experience in school that must capture their immediate attention and imagination. In the absence of real alternatives, schools remain the institutions through which young adolescents learn about their place in the world and develop the commitments to themselves and others that shape their future. Schools in which normal routines and practices foster success and encourage students to make such commitments are schools with holding power for vulnerable students.

Good schools themselves are the most compelling reason for students to resist dropping out. Schools remain the institutions through which young adolescents learn about their place in the world and develop the commitments to themselves and others that shape their future.

Our double concern for meeting the needs of students most likely to leave school before graduation and for strengthening the holding power of the schools such students attend leads us to focus our attention on the middle grades. Both our reading and our experience indicate that the stresses of schooling begin to intensify at the middle level. It is these stresses related to school achievement, behavior, and membership that pose grave danger to already disadvantaged students who have the fewest resources to cope with new hurdles. Research and practice together suggest that students do not suddenly turn into dropouts overnight. We believe we must examine the years preceding the legally allowed school leaving age and look closely at the school context that corresponds to those years for a better understanding of the dropout process.

Our goal in this monograph is to synthesize the lessons of current trends in the literature—on school reform, dropouts, effective schools, and successful practices in the middle grades—in order to create a framework for thinking about dropout prevention at the intermediate level. We have read widely in these areas to assess the most important findings which, taken together, suggest purposeful strategies for strengthening schools' holding power for students in the middle grades. We also draw connections between what we have read and what we have observed in our work to describe practices which, while sometimes lacking in rigorous evaluation, nonetheless appear promising in the new directions they signal for the education of vulnerable young adolescents.

While current literature on school dropouts makes scant reference to specific needs of middle grades students, current literature on middle level education largely ignores the particular needs of the most vulnerable students in the intermediate grades. Nor does much of this literature speculate on the potential benefit of state-of-the-art middle grades practices for vulnerable students. Yet perspectives derived from each area of study open significant possibilities for informing the other.

On one hand, literature on early school leaving describes the lack of success, alienation, and exclusion that characterize the school experiences of dropouts. On the other hand, successful middle grades schools appear to offer new ways of organizing school routines to enhance student success, promote a sense of membership, identity and self-esteem, and avoid premature foreclosure of options for students. Our goal is to link these perspectives and apply the lessons of each to the other so that we can gain clearer understanding of the role middle grades schools can play in addressing the school dropout problem.

To the extent that traditional middle grades programs pursue policies and practices that are hazardous to young adolescents' social and emotional growth and undermine their ability to learn, those schools will be putting all students at risk. When schools' practices result in increased school failure, alienation, and exclusion, they will have a negative impact on young adolescent students and may set the stage for dropping out.

We believe that to the extent that traditional middle grades programs pursue policies and practices that are hazardous to young adolescents' social and emotional growth and undermine their ability to learn, those schools will be putting all students at risk. When schools' practices result in increased school failure, alienation, and exclusion, they will have a negative impact on young adolescent students and may set the stage for dropping out. By the same token, we hypothesize that when harmful practices are reformed and when features of successful middle grades schools are introduced into schools enrolling young adolescents, such schools can increase their holding power for students at risk and, by extension, for all students. These assumptions are at the core of this paper.

We hope this report will build new bridges between research and practice. Political interests, institutional habit, and social custom weigh heavily on educational decision-making and have powerful influence on policy-makers and practitioners alike. At the same time, research findings and information about promising practices are not always easily available to decision-makers or practitioners caught up in the day-to-day operation of their own districts and classrooms. Both these conditions contribute to entrenchment of outmoded practices and resistance to change. We hope this report will make some of the most relevant research more accessible to educators and provide new information to both practitioners and policy-makers so that they can assess unquestioned assumptions, policies, and practices and formulate new ideas for action.

The current climate of reform and sense of urgency for our future create a unique opportunity for greater understanding and commitment to action to improve our schools. We can seize this opportunity by intervening in the middle grades with approaches that strengthen the holding power of schools for all students. We hope that the themes, research findings, and program ideas which we present here will inspire educators, policy-makers, parents, and concerned citizens to think creatively about the role of middle grades schools in dropout prevention and to dare to imagine schools which both challenge and nurture all young adolescent students, especially the most vulnerable.

CHAPTER ONE

DROPOUTS AND THEIR SCHOOLS: DEFINING A FOCUS FOR INTERVENTION

An estimated 27.4 percent of our nation's students drop out of school before high school graduation. In major urban school districts, dropout rates are estimated to be as high as 50 percent.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an estimated 27.4 percent of our nation's students drop out of school before high school graduation. In major urban school districts, dropout rates are estimated to be as high as 50 percent. Dropouts typically have experienced repeated school failures while drawing meager support for formal education from home or community. Behind these statistics lie the complex life stories of young people who have given up on one of the primary institutions of our society, often as their schools have given up on them.

The following section reviews current research on the demographic profile of dropouts, the school experiences of early school leavers, and reasons young people give for quitting school. We also describe the negative interaction between schools and their vulnerable students and identify specific school practices which contribute to students' disengagement from school. Finally, we suggest that interrelated themes of lack of success, alienation, and exclusion characterize the dropout experience and must be addressed in such a way as to strengthen schools' holding power for vulnerable students.

A PROFILE OF SCHOOL DROPOUTS

"Regardless of their race, youths from poor families are three to four times more likely to drop out than those from more affluent households."

Dropout rates are strikingly high among minority youth. For example, the Center for Education Statistics reports that 12.2 percent of white students who were public high school sophomores in 1980 had dropped out of school by the fall of 1982, while this figure was 17.0 percent for black, 18.0 percent for Hispanic, and 29.2 percent for Native American students. However, these differences are to a significant degree a function of poverty rather than race. The Children's Defense Fund (1987) concludes, "Regardless of their race, youths from poor families are three to four times more likely to drop out than those from more affluent households" (p. 139). In fact, when socioeconomic status is controlled, black and white students remain in, and drop out of, school at roughly similar rates.

Dropout rates are also higher among young people from single-parent families (Ekstrom, *et al.*, 1986). Since such families are more vulnerable to poverty than are dual-parent families, it is likely that much of this difference can also be accounted for by socioeconomic status. Other variables associated with early school leaving are membership in a large family and residence in the South or a large city. Again, these situations are associated with high levels of poverty. Clearly, living in poverty puts young people at perilous risk of dropping out.

However, Steinberg and others (1984) report that the higher dropout rate among Hispanic youth is not entirely attributable to greater socioeconomic disadvantage. Language-minority Hispanic youth do drop out at rates higher than language-minority youth from non-Hispanic backgrounds. He suggests that non-English speaking background combines with other factors, such as parental desire to maintain Spanish and prejudice among school personnel, which touch particularly on the lives of Hispanic youth to increase dropout rates for this group.

Moreover, recent research suggests that additional factors may also be at work. LeCompte (1987), for example, notes that dropping out is becoming "gentrified." Based on her survey of dropouts in Houston, she contends that the "new dropouts" include very young, middle class, gifted-and-bored, and parenting students. For these subgroups of the dropout population, factors other than poverty contribute to early school leaving.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF DROPOUTS

Compared to students who remain in school, dropouts have accumulated a variety of school experiences which undermine their commitment to school (Alpert and Dunham, 1986; Ekstrom, *et al*., 1986; Hess, 1987; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). Academically, dropouts have lower grades and test scores and are more likely to be enrolled in a general or vocational curriculum. Dropouts are also more likely to have been retained in grade, resulting in their being overage for their grade placement. They have more reported discipline problems and higher truancy, tardiness, and suspension rates in school, as well as more serious behavior problems outside of school. They are likely to be more dissatisfied with how they are doing in school, have a greater sense of failure in school, feel less satisfied with themselves and their accomplishments in general, and question the relevance of school to their futures more fundamentally than do students who remain in school. Additionally, dropouts seem to have fewer informal learning opportunities and are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities or sports. They often come from families with lower educational aspirations for their children, less parental monitoring of both in-school and out-of-school behavior, and are less likely to discuss current experiences and future aspirations with parents.

WHY LEAVE SCHOOL? WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

An examination of the reasons young people give for dropping out and the differences between school leavers and stayers adds detail and richness to both the demographic and educational characteristics of the dropout population. Table 1 reports "Yes" responses when dropouts in the High School and Beyond (HS&B) sample were asked to check as many reasons as they felt were relevant to their decision to leave school (Ekstrom, *et al*., p. 363).[1]

Table 1: Major Reasons for Dropping Out of School
(Percent responding "Yes" to each item)

	Total	**Males**	**Females**
Did not like school	33%	35%	31%
Poor grades	33%	36%	30%
Offered job and chose to work	19%	27%	11%
Getting married	18%	7%	31%
Could not get along with teachers	15%	21%	9%
Had to help support family	11%	14%	8%
Pregnancy	11%	--	23%
Expelled or suspended	10%	13%	5%

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[1] *High School and Beyond*, a national longitudinal study of American high school students sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics, represents the most comprehensive data base available to date on school dropouts.

Roughly a third of both boys and girls cited dislike of school and poor grades as reasons for dropping out, but boys were twice as likely as girls to say their inability to get along with teachers contributed to their dropping out and almost three times as likely to have been expelled or suspended. In reviewing HS&B data and similar data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Labor Market Experience, Mann (1986) points to another gender difference—girls drop out to care for families or to have children while boys leave school to support families.

Using ethnographic techniques, Fine (1986) recorded the actual words of urban dropouts. Fine clustered the self-described reasons young people presented for leaving school into five categories:

1. ***Perceived low value of a high school diploma***

   Because of the dire economic realities facing poor, minority youth, students observe that a diploma does not always guarantee a job or income.

2. ***Competing responsibilities***

   Many students must leave school in order to take care of family or economic obligations.

3. ***Undermined self-esteem***

   Many young people experience the traditional authoritarian, competitive, teacher-controlled school environment and the incongruity between their own life experiences and the middle-class orientation of their teachers as disenfranchising, defeating, and degrading.

4. ***School "push out" practices and policies***

   Once "problem" students reach the legal school-leaving age, they are pushed out of school or not encouraged to stay if they do attend.

5. ***Pregnancy***

   While it is illegal to expel a pregnant girl, pregnancy is a leading reason girls give for quitting school.

It is necessary to look for the roots of early school leaving in students' educational, social, and economic circumstances rather than in individual deficits.

Based on her interviews with and observations of both students and staff in a large urban high school, Fine argues that it is necessary to look for the roots of early school leaving in students' educational, social, and economic circumstances rather than in individual deficits. She also suggests that many reforms of the excellence movement divert attention from the need for more basic changes to benefit young people both in schools and society.

Indeed, the reasons school dropouts give for leaving school reflect a mind set in which the perceived high costs of staying in school combined with the perceived low benefits associated with remaining create a disposition to early school leaving. It appears that when students experience high and immediate costs of school attendance (including repeated failure, lowered self-esteem, and conflict with teachers and other students) and also perceive few future benefits to staying in school (including opportunities for higher education or productive work), the stage is set for their later dropping out. To understand this mind set in greater depth, it is also necessary to examine common school responses to the problems and needs of these vulnerable students.

STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS: AN INTERACTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

This brief review of descriptive literature on dropouts hints at the interconnectedness of multiple factors that come together to cause a young person to leave school. As Dale Mann notes, "Most students quit because of the compounded impact of, for example, being poor, growing up in a broken home, having been held back in the fourth grade, and finally having slugged 'Mr. Fairlee,' the school's legendary vice-principal for enforcement" (Mann, 1986, p. 311). Both quantitative research and case vignettes of dropouts highlight the relationship between school practices and students' experience of themselves in relation to their school.

Efforts to reverse the slide toward early school leaving must account both for the problems vulnerable students present and the practices which characterize the schools they attend. Gary Wehlage and Robert Rutter have observed, "The process of becoming a dropout is complex because the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to the society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person" (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986, p. 385). We add that this process does not begin at the high school level. Rather, messages of rejection begin in the years before high school, intensifying at the middle grades level. Young adolescent students experience these messages at the same time that they are embarking on their quest for identity, much to the detriment of their self-image and sense of themselves as fully accepted members of their school.

Negative messages concerning students' academic performance or behavior are an inherent part of the school experience of our dropouts. Often these messages are communicated, perhaps unintentionally, through school staff whose daily behaviors discourage students from continuing their education (Fine, 1986). Frequently these messages are institutionalized in formal policies and practices which contribute to students' perception that they do not belong in school.

From an interactive perspective, it is clear that a central goal of dropout prevention in the middle grades must be to alter the negative messages that school policies and practices convey to vulnerable students. Dropout prevention approaches in the middle grades must include the elimination of practices which undermine student engagement and send signals of rejection to vulnerable students. Prevention efforts must replace such practices with others which enhance both young adolescent students' chances for success and their membership in the school community and which facilitate more positive interaction between vulnerable students and the adults in their schools. These goals highlight the need to reform the dynamic between students and their schools and address three themes which emerge repeatedly in the lives of dropouts—lack of success, alienation, and exclusion—each of which plays off against the other two in a debilitating downward spiral of cause and effect, resulting in students' conclusion that "school is not for me."

A central goal of dropout prevention in the middle grades must be to alter the negative messages that school policies and practices convey to vulnerable students.

LACK OF SUCCESS AND MESSAGES OF REJECTION

Many children who live in poverty begin their school careers at a disadvantage due to minimal stimulation for learning in their earlier years and a myriad of health, family, and community problems that often accompany socioeconomic disadvantage. These children often enter schools which have high concentrations of low-income students. In turn, such schools frequently "have fewer fiscal resources, attract less experienced teachers, and generally do not have a community constituency as able as other communities to contribute to a school's educational program or monitor its performance" (Children's Defense Fund, 1987, p. 141).

While black, Hispanic, and disadvantaged children have made sizeable gains in reading and math achievement since the early 1970s, discrepancies between them and their more privileged peers emerge early. For example, the ***Reading Report Card*** of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1985) reveals 16 percent of all black nine-year-olds have failed to acquire the most basic reading skills, a rate four times that of their white peers. Without basic skills, children face failure every school day and may reach the conclusion early in their school careers that they are "dumb" and that schools do not care about them or their learning. For students who encounter academic problems, messages of rejection become concrete through failed grades, non- promotion, placement in lower-ability tracks, and teachers' lower expectations.

Without basic skills, children face failure every school day and may reach the conclusion early in their school careers that they are "dumb" and that schools do not care about them or their learning. For students who encounter academic problems, messages of rejection become concrete through failed grades, non-promotion, placement in lower-ability tracks, and teachers' lower expectations.

Retention in Grade

By the late elementary or early middle grades years, many students have accumulated a history of school failure which is exacerbated by a common school response to lack of academic success—grade retention. Holding children back contributes directly to dropping out. Being retained in one grade increases the risk of dropping out by 40–50 percent; two grades by 90 percent (Bachman, 1971). Researchers in Chicago have found that over-age students, even students reading at higher levels than their age-appropriate peers, are more likely to drop out than students with lower scores placed in classes with their age-appropriate peers (Hess, 1987). Contrary to popular belief, even retention in the elementary grades increases the probability of dropping out (Hammack, 1986).

Moreover, holding students back does not improve student achievement and, in fact, intensifies rather than remediates students' lack of success. Recent reviews of the literature on the effects of grade retention on academic achievement, personal adjustment, and attitude toward school consistently conclude that "...retained pupils fall further behind during the year they are retained and spend the rest of their academic careers in vain attempt to catch up" (Holmes, 1983, p. 4). In a second literature review, Holmes and Matthews (1984) conclude that while some students make modest progress during the year in which they repeat a grade, they do not advance so much as similar children who are promoted. Grade repetitions also create additional distress and shame for students who fall behind. According to recent research, children identify non-promotion as a highly stressful experience, ranking grade retention third behind blindness and death of a parent among their most feared life experiences (Smith and Shepard, 1987).

The experience of non-promotion becomes increasingly common in the middle grades. As students without adequate skills enter courses which demand increasing specialization, many find themselves over their head academically. In one urban system, for example, nearly 12 percent of all sixth graders and 19 percent of all seventh graders were not promoted in June, 1987 compared to two percent of all fifth graders (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1988). Such failure rates parallel similar patterns in other districts (Safer, 1986). We believe that non-promotion in the middle grades sends a powerful signal to young adolescents that they may not be suited for school. Moreover, their resulting status as overage-for-grade sets many students up for a later decision to leave school entirely.

Tracking and Ability Grouping

Students who have failed a grade frequently experience a second school practice that compounds their failure and reinforces their uncertainty about their place in school—the abuse of tracking and ability grouping. In a thorough review of both the intent and the actual effects of tracking, Jeannie Oakes (1985) acknowledges that tracking is a well-intended practice based on the assumption that students learn better and teachers teach more effectively when students are grouped homogeneously by ability levels. However, in four aspects of schooling—academic learning; social relationships with peers and teachers; student self-concept, motivation, aspiration; and vocational education—students who are placed in lower tracks receive a poorer quality education than students in higher tracks. In actuality, "It turns out that those children who seem to have the least of everything in the rest of their lives most often get less at school as well" (Oakes, 1985, p. 4). In addition, as John Goodlad concludes, "Minority students and those from the lowest socioeconomic groups have been found in disproportionate numbers in classes at the lowest track levels, and children from upper socioeconomic levels have been found to be consistently overrepresented in higher tracks" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 152).

The sorting function of schools often begins in the elementary grades but becomes formalized in the middle grades as achievement gaps between poorer and wealthier students widen. As tracks become more fixed, labeled, and immediately related to future educational and career options, individual students begin to form their own impressions about their future opportunities in school and in the world of work. At the middle grades level, students enter a developmental stage where their individual identity is formed in relation to their peers and the adults who play significant roles in their lives. It is not surprising that vulnerable students assess the status of their school placement and suspect that the adults who made the decision to place them in such tracks have judged them "losers."

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Misuse of Standardized Tests

Along with non-promotion and the abuse of tracking is a third school practice which frequently drives decisions for both grade retention and ability grouping—the misuse of standardized testing. In the past several years, while many states have mandated specific scores on standardized tests as a requirement for graduation, local districts have increasingly specified that promotion from certain grades be conditioned on a single score on a single standardized test. As a result, both teachers, parents, citizens, and students have come to equate improved test scores with improved education despite evidence to the contrary.

Test scores, in fact, are limited indicators of real student achievement. Madaus (1983) has noted that standardized tests do not assess traditional academic skills such as writing, problem-solving, the ability to ask probing questions, or plan a scientific experiment. Nor can such tests measure motivation, cooperation, or enthusiasm for learning or predict future success in "real life," higher education, or the world of work. Standardized test scores can not replace teachers' judgments about students' capacities for growth and development or their contribution to classroom learning.

Reliance on a single test score to make decisions regarding promotion or ability grouping effectively narrows the range of skills measured by the school and redefines student competence. In the process, the school may increasingly fail to reward the progress of vulnerable students whose strengths do not match those measured by such tests. Gardner (1983) has argued that human intelligence encompasses at least seven forms of giftedness. Standardized tests tell us little about the complexities of intellectual, artistic, emotional, or physical resourcefulness. Yet the widespread use of standardized testing may communicate to many vulnerable students that their unique strengths are not valued and contribute to students' perception that school is no place for them.

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Standardized Curriculum and Instruction

In a similar way, the use of standardized test scores to determine promotion, graduation, or placement in more or less desirable programs can have profound impact on curriculum and instruction, affecting students' qualitative experience of school. Madaus (1987) has discussed how test results become the major goal of schooling when high-stakes testing programs are introduced in a system. In addition, he and others have pointed out that test scores and real learning may not be synonymous. In an in-depth study of magnet schools in one district, McNeil (1988) found that as a result of the introduction of a centralized testing program, the district's most outstanding teachers quickly learned to separate "school knowledge" from real knowledge to conform with the proficiencies to be tested. As teachers abandoned integrated curriculum assignments and active teaching approaches in order to cover simplified proficiency material, their teaching lost its credibility and the curriculum its authenticity. The effect did not go unnoticed by students. As McNeil notes, "When school knowledge is not credible to students, they opt out and decide to wait until 'later' to learn 'what you really need to know'" (p. 485). Such conditions may contribute to early school leaving for academically vulnerable as well as gifted-but-bored students, a significant subgroup among the new dropouts.

Punitive Practices Which Compound the Consequences of Academic Failure

Finally, a variety of other district and school-based practices compound the consequences of student lack of success and frequently dovetail with policies of non-promotion, tracking, misuse of standardized testing, and standardized curriculum to send messages of rejection to vulnerable students. For example, many schools require students to attain certain grades in order to participate in athletics or extra-curricular activities. While such a practice may increase some students' academic motivation, the effect on many marginal students is likely to be a negative one.

Literature on charateristics of school dropouts points to dropouts' lack of engagement in athletics or extra-curricular activities (Ekstrom, *et al.*, 1984; Wehlage, 1983). Barring students who are failing their academic subjects from such activities can permanently marginalize these students and ensure that the most vulnerable students will remain outside the mainstream of school life. In turn, such policies may contribute to the doubts of many fragile young people that school is a place where they belong.

NEGATIVE MESSAGES ABOUT SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP AND "BELONGING"

For many vulnerable students, lack of success in school both contributes to and results from an increased sense of alienation from school as an institution. Newman (1981) has noted that although alienation in schools is associated with disruption and poor achievement, student disengagement generally goes unrecognized as the source of many school problems. Despite this, he insists that reducing student alienation is key to engaging students in their learning and, by implication, to retaining students in school.

By extension, we believe that it is necessary to identify and revise school practices that contribute to student alienation, detachment, and isolation and undermine students' sense of belonging in their school. Policies and practices that convey negative messages regarding membership and participation in the larger school community often interact with negative messages related to students' academic success. Messages of rejection related to students' non-academic performance are rooted both in specific policies and in school structure and climate.

Attendance Policies

In perhaps no other area related to dropping out is student ambivalence about school membership so dramatically evident as in the area of attendance. Indeed, high rates of student absence and class-cutting are both cause and effect of increased alienation and often predict dropping out (Kaeser, 1985; Moos and Moos, 1978; Nielsen, 1979; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986; Weitzman, 1985). Chronic truants in the middle grades already exhibit many characteristics of dropouts—they are behind grade level, come from families with multiple and serious socioeconomic stresses, and feel alienated from the mainstream of school life. When such students return to school after an absence, punitive, exclusionary, impersonal, or lackadaisical school responses create more hostility and rejection. At the same time, school attendance policies typically do little to address core problems such as conflicts with teachers and peers, family dysfunction, or repeated academic defeats that often underlie student absences.

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In a report released by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the United States Department of Education (1987), the Urban Superintendents Network has listed a range of policies and practices that contribute to poor school attendance. School failure to inform parents about student absence and failure to acknowledge and facilitate truant students' return to school after prolonged absence top the list of such practices. The Network also found that many districts inappropriately suspend truant or tardy students and may feed students' doubts about their belonging in school by turning tardy students away at the door. Finally, the report noted that the practice of referring truant students to court in hopes of "scaring" them back to school is not likely to work unless students receive services necessary to change factors contributing to the truancy. In short, many common school responses to truant students tend either to ignore the absence or to treat truancy as misbehavior to be corrected by punishment.

An increasingly common response to student attendance problems is the practice of denying credit or grade promotion to students who exceed a specified number of allowed absences in a given term. While the threat of non-promotion may motivate some of the more able students at risk, some educators and advocates for students have argued that such policies are more likely to be counterproductive (Raywid, 1985; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). In one district which has adopted the practice of tying attendance to academic credit, researchers have found that once already vulnerable students have used up the allowed number of days absent, they realize further attendance has no tangible benefit and cease attending altogether. Attendance data for middle school students in this district showed that while 85 percent of the students met the attendance requirement in the first marking period, only 73 percent were meeting the standard by the fourth term. Moreover, by the end of that school year, 19 percent were truant the equivalent of one day a week or more (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986).

School Suspension

As children move from elementary into junior high or middle school, their acting out behavior may become more serious for both them and the school. In turn, as the schools' response to troublesome behavior becomes more emphatic, the downward spiral of failure, alienation, and rejection also intensifies, and students caught in this spiral frequently drop out of school altogether.

Many children who fail to achieve academically may bring behavior problems to school with them or act out in response to the frustration and boredom engendered by their school experiences. Disruptive behavior is both a symptom of students' underlying alienation from school and a cause for more rejection from the institution. As children move from elementary into junior high or middle school, their acting out behavior may become more serious for both them and the school. In turn, as the schools' response to troublesome behavior becomes more emphatic, the downward spiral of failure, alienation, and rejection also intensifies, and students caught in this spiral frequently drop out of school altogether.

Suspension as a school response to misbehavior is strongly correlated with early school leaving. In their analysis of the longitudinal High School and Beyond data, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that 44 percent of black dropouts, 31 percent of Hispanic dropouts, and 26 percent of white dropouts had been suspended or put on probation at least once. Significantly smaller proportions (19, 17, and 11 percent) of the students who stayed to graduate had been suspended or put on probation. In one urban system, school dropouts were more than twice as likely to have been suspended in the year prior to their leaving than their stay-in counterparts (Camayd-Freixas, 1986).

Moreover, suspension and expulsion are practices that have significant and disproportionate impact on minority students. For example, in Prince George's County, Virginia, in the 1986–87 school year, black students made up 64 percent of enrollment but received 75 percent of all school expulsions (Riley, 1988). Disproportionate suspensions, potentially diagnostic of school climate problems, are widespread in many urban districts as well, and black students attending schools with high and disproportionate minority suspension rates are especially vulnerable to dropping out (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Felice, 1981).

School Climate and School Rules

While suspension is perhaps the most powerful message of rejection contributing to student disengagement from school, other factors rooted in the climate of individual schools may undermine students' sense of membership in the school community. Reports from two recent national panels and much of the literature on school discipline, exclusion, and dropouts cite institutional race and class discrimination and cultural insensitivity of school personnel as conditions in the school climate that alienate minority youth in particular from their schools (Felice, 1981; Fine, 1986; First and Mizell, 1980; Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1986; Martinez, 1986; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). Many minority students draw strength for overcoming these barriers from their own inner resources, from their families, and from adults who inspire them to achieve. However, many other young people cannot mobilize sufficient resources to overcome debilitating stereotypes and institutional discrimination. These youth experience race and class discrimination and cultural insensitivity as further evidence that they are not valued in their schools and do not belong there.

Regardless of race, students' perceptions of school rules as unfair or ineffective tell us volumes about the conditions which nurture school disengagement. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) have shown that approximately half of all dropouts rate the effectiveness of discipline in their school as "Poor" or "Fair." Moreover, similar proportions give negative ratings to the fairness of their schools' discipline. Indeed, in this area, the perceptions of dropouts almost mirror those of their non-college-bound stay-in counterparts, a finding which attests to the failure of school climate conditions to engage all but our college-bound youth.

Based on our own discussions with students and educators, we suspect that negative perceptions of school discipline among many vulnerable students derive in part from students' experience of rules as arbitrary and in part from the failure of adults in school to distinguish between discipline and punishment. This failure is insititutionalized through such school-based practices as placement of students in unstructured and unsupervised in-school suspension, failure to help students learn to negotiate conflict or talk about differences as an alternative to fighting, and failure to provide students with genuine opportunities to propose, discuss, revise, or appeal school rules. In such a climate, vulnerable students are likely to receive signals that they must either conform or leave, with few opportunities in between for negotiating terms which give them a sense that their ideas, opinions, or needs make a difference in the way the school responds to them.

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School Organization

Alienation is closely tied to an increasing sense of anonymity which vulnerable students may experience as they leave the elementary grades. At the middle grades level, such feelings become especially intense as young adolescents enter a new developmental stage and begin to form their sense of individual identity and place in relation to the larger society. From the elementary grades where students learn in self-contained classrooms spending each day with one teacher and a consistent group of peers, young adolescents are often thrown into the large, impersonal setting of a traditional junior high school where they encounter seven different teachers and seven different sets of students in each class every day, a pattern typical of high school grades as well. Any thirteen-year-old is likely to feel lost in such a setting. However, students at risk of dropping out are most likely to feel the lack of personalization in such settings and come to believe that "no one in school cares about me."

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One effect of such fragmentation in the organization of a school may be an increase in in-school truancy or class-cutting. Such structures reinforce anonymity and undermine students' sense of membership in the school community by failing to adopt mechanisms which can keep track of students and encourage communication among responsible adults about specific students at risk. Without close tracking, alienated students who are already withdrawn can easily become invisible.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986) found that class-cutting was significantly higher among dropouts than among their stay-in counterparts. School responses to the problem, however, may hurt more than help. Despite the fact that punishment does not re-engage vulnerable students, some schools choose to respond harshly, sometimes going to such lengths as requesting that police arrest students who cut class but remain on school property on the grounds that they are trespassing. When schools fail to address causes of in-school truancy rooted in school organization, students are likely to read messages of rejection into such punitive responses.

CONCLUSION

The implication of existing dropout literature in total is that the dynamics of dropping out are complex and involve the interaction of certain school responses with certain student characteristics resulting in the disengagement of students from their schools. Negative school experiences for marginal students feed on each other, creating a school context which presents enormous hurdles for students who are otherwise often without supports needed to cope. Lack of school success and alienation become interconnected symptoms which characterize the experience of vulnerable students.

We have noted some school policies and practices which may send messages of rejection to students who may already harbor doubts that schools holds any promise for them. Such policies and practices, common to many schools, further penalize vulnerable students and push them further from the mainstream experience without addressing either the needs of such students or the causes of students' school problems. Approaches to dropout prevention must address the needs of individual students and at the same time reassess the impact of school policies, practices, and organization on students most at risk of dropping out.

CHAPTER TWO

CURRENT STATUS OF MIDDLE GRADES SCHOOLS

Because of the essential need to understand how the relationship between vulnerable students and school practices and policies may contribute to dropping out, a framework for thinking about dropout prevention in the middle grades must take into consideration the current status of intermediate level education. As we approach the 1990s, both the theory and practice of middle level education reflect a mixture of traditional and innovative approaches. The following pages summarize the practical and theoretical gaps in current middle grades practice. They also describe characteristics of successful middle level schools, particularly in relation to the promise such schools hold out for students at risk of dropping out.

FACTORS SHAPING POLICY AND PRACTICE

In the present era of increased attention to educational reform in the United States, attention to the middle grades has, until recently, been strikingly absent. On one hand, a number of major studies have focused on the status of high school education (Boyer, 1983; Lightfoot, 1983; Powell, *et al.*, 1985; Sizer, 1984). On the other hand, the work of researchers who describe "effective schools" has fostered school improvement projects primarily in the early grades (Edmonds, 1979; Sizemore, 1985).

An equivalent effort to understand the conditions of middle grades education has been largely lacking, perhaps because the need for school reform is most obvious at either the beginning or end of the educational continuum. Major exceptions to this trend are evident in the work of North Carolina's Center for Early Adolescence and the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at The Johns Hopkins University. The Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development is currently reviewing needs of students in the middle grades and will clearly make a major contribution to this area in the future.

The National Middle Schools Association (NMSA) and the Council on Middle Level Education of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have also written persuasively on improvement in the middle grades, but their reports have circulated primarily within professional circles and have not conveyed an urgency for change to the general public. Nor have they captured the public's imagination and fueled the momentum for reform as the commercially published studies of American high schools have done. Even recommendations for middle grades restructuring from the prestigious Committee for Economic Development (1987) have been overshadowed by the Committee's other recommendations focused on renewed support for health and educational programs for younger children.

The fact that education for young adolescents is often seen as the "stepchild" of schooling for younger children or older adolescents is both a cause and consequence of this lack of attention. In much of the general literature in education, the unique purpose and mission of schooling for young adolescents is as ill-defined as its structure. For example, the lack of agreement on preferred organization of middle grades is reflected in the fact that nationwide education for young adolescents takes the form of 36 different grade configurations which include grades 6 through 8 (Lipsitz, *et al.*, 1984a). Such a hodgepodge of grade configurations is symptomatic of an uncertainty about where these grades—and by implication the children in them—really do belong.

Achievement Data from the Middle Grades

Regardless of how middle grades are clustered in schools, a number of researchers have documented the failure of current middle level curriculum and instruction to help young adolescents achieve competence in basic skills, especially in reading (Lounsbury, *et al.*, 1980; Arnold, 1982; NAEP, 1985). Starting in the late elementary grades, teachers assume that children can read to learn. However, in fact, 40 percent of all 13-year-olds have not acquired rudimentary comprehension skills and are unable to search for specific information, interrelate ideas, or make generalizations about materials they read. Moreover, deficiencies in basic reading skills are greater for minority than white youngsters. In spite of these needs, instruction to remediate skill deficits in the middle grades is practically non-existent (Children's Defense Fund, 1987; Durkin, 1978; Olson, 1984).

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Data also indicate deficiencies in mathematics achievement among young adolescents (Travers and McKnight, 1985; Romberg and Stuart, 1984). The modest decline in eighth grade math achievement between 1964 and 1982 stems, in large part, from lower scores in skill areas requiring higher cognitive learning. Math curriculum in middle grades is typically restricted to low-level arithmetic skills with little attention to applications, problem-solving, and dealing with numerical information. Moreover, by eighth grade, math curriculum is highly differentiated into high school preparatory algebra curricula for some select students and remedial classes for many others.

Unfortunately, many schools for young adolescents respond to their students' diverse levels of academic preparation by initiating specific sorting practices at the middle level, typically resulting in further delays for students who are already behind. Despite the recognition that young adolescents' development is marked by rapid and highly individualistic changes in physical, cognitive, and social-emotional capacities and interests, many traditional middle grades models classify students as if their growth were static. Such classification may result in the premature foreclosure of future options for many students.

Organizational Features of Middle Grades Education

Middle grades traditionally are seen as transitional grades during which preparation for high school is a major goal. Consequently, many, although not all, schools for young adolescents are characterized by such organizational features as a departmental structure and individualized scheduling with classes in discrete 50-minute time periods. Such practices reflect the notion of the middle or junior high school as a high school in miniature designed for adolescents who are simply smaller in size than their high school counterparts. Seen as mini-high schools, schools for young adolescents typically lack an identity of their own, both in the mind of the public and in their own self-description.

The middle schools movement that began in the 1950s and has steadily gained momentum since actually has its origins in the junior high school movement of the 1920s. Indeed, the reorganization of schools into junior high schools took place in response to societal concern for the failure of many young people to graduate from public school. In an attempt to provide young adolescents with an environment more in tune with students' real life situations, the early junior high schools emphasized such features as vocational training and work-study programs (Molitor and Dentler, 1982).

Thirty years later, a new movement to reform middle grades education emerged. Concerned that junior high schools were not properly educating their students, reformers proposed a restructuring of schools for young adolescents. This time around, however, the movement for reform focused on developmental issues. Students ages 10 to 14 were understood as having unique developmental needs best met in a specialized setting.

The most apparent consequence of this reform is a reordering of grade configuration for this age group. Traditional junior high grades are sometimes extended down to include sixth or even fifth grade students, while ninth graders are moved to a high school. Recent research, however, suggests that such reorganizations are more cosmetic than substantive. Based on a survey of over 4,000 schools, researchers report that while grade configuration may change, the traditional organization and curriculum designed for seventh through ninth graders remains essentially unchanged. It is not surprising, therefore, that grade configuration has, for the most part, little impact on student achievement, discipline, or self-esteem (Lipsitz, *et al.*, 1984a).

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In particular, few clear differences emerge when researchers compare students in junior high schools with students in middle schools. Some differences, however, are suggested when the experiences of students in K–8 schools are compared with those of students in junior high schools. Early maturing girls, for example, are more vulnerable to a loss of self-esteem in junior high school models. However, after a thorough review of available literature, Lipsitz and her co-researchers (1984a) conclude that rather than focusing on grade organization, schools would be better off assessing school leadership, responsiveness to early adolescent developmental characteristics, and educational effectiveness as a basis for reviewing school performance.

Middle Grades Staff: Low Status, Limited Influence

One consequence of the lack of organizational identity of schools enrolling young adolescents is the low status ascribed to middle or junior high school teachers. Frequently, middle grades teachers are trained as elementary teachers or as high school teachers with a subject specialty; between 40 and 60 percent of teachers in middle schools have no special training in working with young adolescent students (McEwin and Clay, 1983; McEwin and Allen, 1986). By 1985, while 26 states defined special certification requirements for middle level teachers, certification was mandatory for middle grades teachers in only 11 states. As the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy works to promote the creation of a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a major opportunity may emerge for reform in the preparation and certification of middle grades teachers.

Like many teachers at other levels, middle grades teachers often have limited opportunity to make decisions about schooling which directly affect their students, particularly those decisions related to curriculum, testing policy, or school structure. In our visits to schools and in discussion with educators, we have also learned that many middle level teachers have few chances to talk with their peers about their work. While teachers may have control over what goes on in their classrooms, few have regular opportunies to participate actively in school organizational decisions (Dorman, 1987; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

Just as many teachers in middle grades schools are inadequately prepared for their role in educating young adolescents, many middle grades administrators fall short of the mark in their preparation for leadership in their schools. While Edmonds (1979) and others have reported that effective schools are led by principals who can manage people, act as educational leaders, and guide organizational change, reports on principals' needs and experience indicate that few middle level school principals are able to manage a school through a planned change effort (Dorman, 1987). Moreover, many principals report they do not receive adequate preparation or in-service training in critical areas of developing school climate, staff evaluation, team building, internal communications, and supervision (Olivero, 1982).

Lack of Theoretical Grounding for Middle Grades Education

The persistence of traditional school organization models, departmentalized curricula, and teachers trained to work with younger children or older adolescents are part of a larger picture painted by several studies that view middle grades practice as operating in a theoretical vacuum. Central to the lack of a theoretical and research underpinning for middle grades practice is the traditional failure of schools for young adolescents to understand how the needs of normal adolescent development must shape their policies and practices. With only an embryonic theoretical and research base to guide reform, practitioners and policy makers often follow traditional approaches with little understanding of their impact on young adolescent students (Dorman, 1986; Lipsitz, 1984b).

A DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE MIDDLE GRADES

Lipsitz (1984b) has written, "A central weakness in most schools for young adolescents is a widespread failure to reconsider each school practice in terms of developmental needs in order either to incorporate responsibility for meeting them into the schools' academic and social goals or to keep them from being barriers to attaining those goals" (p. 168). We believe such insensitivity to the age group is at least in part responsible for low achievement and attendance rates and high suspension rates that mark many schools for young adolescents. Failure to recognize young adolescents' unique developmental needs and poor understanding of ways in which such students can be academically challenged contribute to inappropriate curriculum, pedagogy, and discipline practices that characterize many traditional schools for these students.

Dorman (1984, 1987) has distilled seven key developmental needs of young adolescents from the literature on adolescent development. These needs are related to students' beginning quest for identity and have implications for ways in which the middle grades can be organized to create a climate that provides optimal conditions for their learning. These needs include:

Developmental needs of young adolescents are related to students' beginning quest for identity and have implications for ways in which the middle grades can be organized to create a climate that provides optimal conditions for their learning.

1. ***Structure and clear limits***

   Students who are going through rapid physical and social-emotional changes need security in order to learn and grow. Clear, consistent rules are appropriate, but they are more likely to be accepted and valued by students who have participated in their formulation and adoption.

2. ***Diversity***

   In early adolescence, students' cognitive abilities are grounded largely in concrete thinking while they move toward a greater capacity for abstract thinking. This, combined with the wide range of abilities and interests of the age group, demands school routines, instruction, and curriculum which balance a variety of learning activities and materials.

3. ***Self-exploration and self-definition***

   At the core of developmental issues for many young adolescents, the question "Am I normal?" reflects students' need to define for themselves their values and their relationship to their family, friends, and school. The need for self-definition also plays into students' need for reassurance that they will be accepted as individuals in their schools.

4. ***Competence and achievement***

   Schools play a major role in providing young adolescent students with experiences of achievement which, in turn, students incorporate into their emerging definition of themselves as competent individuals. Successful academic and social experiences are essential to building confidence and self-esteem which allow for further growth in later adolescence and young adulthood.

5. ***Meaningful participation in the school and community***

   As young adolescent students grow into adult bodies, they also need opportunities to begin to try out adult roles. While still too inexperienced to take on total responsibility for themselves and their environment, their new roles and increasing ability to think abstractly are at the core of their need to expand their responsibilities into wider arenas, to reflect on their future, and to negotiate, with responsible adults, the norms and expectations for behavior in the school.

6. ***Positive social interaction with adults and peers***

   As young adolescents begin to differentiate themselves from their own families and define their own individual identities, they need increased contact with adult role models who can represent a variety of potential choices for students. At the same time, students' preoccupation with acceptance by their peers reflects their need to develop confidence in interacting with a wide range of other students.

7. ***Physical activity***

   The needs of young adolescents' growing bodies require frequent opportunities to release the physical energy present during early adolescence.

These needs provide a developmental framework both for understanding middle grades students and for assessing the current status of middle grades schools. Moreover, the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional characteristics of emerging adolescents have specific implications for appropriate organization, curriculum, and instructional approaches in the middle grades (Wiles and Bondi, 1980).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Successful schools that acknowledge the unique needs of young adolescents do exist. Such schools have been profiled in the literature of the National Middle Schools Association. Others have been described in depth by independent researchers in specific districts and as part of an effort to detail the workings of successful middle grades schools in diverse parts of the country (Fruchter, 1986; Lipsitz, 1984b).

The most systematic documentation of such schools to date, ***Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*** (Lipsitz, 1984b), describes in detail four middle schools ranging in size from 420 to over 1,000 students. The schools Lipsitz describes are outstanding in meeting measures of academic effectiveness while responding to the developmental diversity and needs of their students. These schools have won acceptance from the local community, meeting local expectations for schooling and working well in spite of unresolved national policy issues.

While practices in the four schools she describes vary widely, Lipsitz makes clear that in addition to helping students achieve academic success, these schools intentionally strive to meet young adolescents' needs for structure and limits, diversity, social interaction, competence, self-definition, meaningful participation in school and community, and physical activity. In these schools, the rationale for all policies, practices, and decisions is couched in terms of these needs. Consequently, the schools Lipsitz describes also have a clarity of purpose which translates into a sense that they stand for something special, a perception which unites students and adults and strengthens the bond they feel to the school and its goals. This purpose, however, does not translate into rigidity. To the contrary, Lipsitz emphasizes that these schools work hard to adapt all practices to the individual differences in physical, cognitive, and social maturation of their students.

The successful middle level schools identified by Lipsitz refuse to accept the dichotomy that schools can be either caring, warm environments or strict, orderly places that stress academics, a characteristic also common to four successful middle grades schools studied in depth in New York City (Fruchter, 1986). On one hand, the schools described by these studies are communities of learners, providing a wide range of opportunities for students to take responsibility and participate in the life of the school. On the other, they emphasize academics, especially reading and mathematics, hold high expectations for the performance of all students, and carefully monitor individual student progress. Typically they offer high levels of challenge, expectations, and teacher praise and allow students to excel along many lines of endeavor, both academic and non-academic.

Finally, the successful schools described in detail by Lipsitz are characterized by high levels of professionalism, collegiality, and effort among teachers. These schools are led by principals with driving vision, and teachers share this vision and work both collaboratively and independently to accomplish deeply valued goals. Pervading all activities, the enduring if hard-to-measure quality in these schools is joy, experienced by staff and students alike.

ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Successful schools for young adolescents do not come about by accident. Rather they evolve from organizational features consciously designed to promote academic effectiveness and attend to crucial developmental needs. While details of these structures vary from school to school, exemplary schools for young adolescents tend to include specific core components (Alexander and George, 1981; Lipsitz, 1984b; National Middle School Association, 1982).

1. Team Teaching within a "School-within-a-School" Model

According to middle grades educator Paul George, "Certain programs, when present, strengthen everything else in the school. In middle schools, it's whatever gives you smallness within bigness" (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). George, like Lipsitz, emphasizes that it is the way in which people are organized to work and learn together that is a key feature of exemplary middle grades schools. Teams may be called "clusters" or "houses," but their purposes do not change: to reduce the distance between students and teachers, to enhance familiarity and a sense of community within the school, and to integrate subject areas into a holistic instructional approach. Teams of teachers typically consist of two to four staff who work both with each other on a consistent basis and also with a consistent group of students, sometimes over several years.

When such a school organization is in place, students are much more likely to feel that they have a place in the school, that they are known by name, and that at least one adult cares about them. Moreover, they do not have to gauge their behavior and interactions to seven separate teachers with seven sets of rules as they change from class to class, but to one team of teachers who share one set of rules and expectations. From the teachers' perspective, the benefits are similar. Teachers benefit from collegiality with their peers and from the opportunity to discuss with others the problems and needs of students whom all get to know well over time.

Some middle grades reformers advocate multi-age groupings within the team, a situation which allows for peer teaching, individualizes student progress, and reduces the stigma of students who are older than their classmates (George and Oldaker, 1985). Such grouping attends to the diversity of developmental stages that is characteristic of the age group and provides teachers with the reward of seeing students grow and change over their three years together. Moreover, it allows student grouping to be assigned to teachers whose instructional style matches the style of individual learners.

2. Diverse Curriculum with an Interdisciplinary Focus

In middle schools that are responsive to the realities of their young adolescent students, the curriculum will look different from that of elementary schools, even when attention is still focused on basic skills. The difference rests on the attention paid to the developmental needs of students, particularly needs for competence, diversity, opportunities for self-definition and participation in the community, and positive interaction with peers and adults. Curriculum is sometimes organized on a thematic basis with all subject areas—language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science—focused on a common overall topic at the same time. Such themes as "The Olympics" or "Whaling Voyages" invite students to engage in a topic through a variety of disciplines, thus allowing for integration and depth of learning rather than fragmentation of subject matter.

Because young adolescents are different from each other and individually changing from day to day, instruction in exemplary middle grades schools depends on a wide variety of teaching approaches. Instruction reflects a balance of approaches including learning by doing, demonstration, individual assignments, small work-groups, and lectures. Teachers mix concrete, semi-concrete, and abstract learning activities, stretching students' minds with "What if...?" and "How do you know...?" questions that coax students into thinking more abstractly. Because young adolescents are beginning to test out their place in the community, learning activities may also take youngsters into the school neighborhood on projects that allow them to form relationships with others—with preschoolers at a local day care center or elderly participants in a community lunch program—and help them reflect on and understand their surroundings.

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For many middle grades schools, the hallmark of the curriculum is a time period, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly, for high interest mini-courses. Just as young adolescents who are tasting independence are trying out new roles, hairstyles, and dress, they are also trying out a broad range of new interests. Such courses are designed to engage students' capacity for intense involvement in a subject of interest while acknowledging that commitment to that subject, given students' developmental stage, may be fleeting.

Such a curriculum need not sacrifice continuing development of basic skills. Indeed, basic math and language skills can be reinforced through such mini-courses as "Equations Tournament," "Trivial Pursuit," "Sports Statistics," or "Penpals in Other Countries." If the mission of the school is to be focused on basic skills improvement and higher order thinking skills, such high interest exploratory courses will reflect this mission. What is different from elementary schools, however, is that students have some opportunity to choose their own vehicle for learning these skills and the chance to change their focus when interest flags and they wish to explore other topics.

In addition to student-selected mini-courses, successful middle grades schools also offer required exploratory courses that may last only one marking period. Subjects may include art, music, foreign languages, home economics, business skills, and industrial arts. These courses can provide important opportunities for achievement for students who learn well in different ways or have skills that involve artistic expression, imagination, or using their hands.

3. Flexible Block Scheduling

Just as a fragmented curriculum is not in keeping with young adolescents' stage of cognitive development, scheduling of courses into 50-minute periods is out of step with young adolescents' needs for clear structure, for stable relationships with peers and adults, and for opportunities to integrate what they learn in one subject with what they learn in another. Flexible scheduling in a school supports a fully-functioning interdisciplinary team because it allows teachers the freedom and responsibility to determine how best to use instructional time. With longer blocks of time available, teachers find it easier to conduct interdisciplinary units and special events such as field trips.

The following schedule is a sample John Lounsbury, former President of the National Association of Middle Schools, offers to illustrate the flexibility that results when schools are freed from a day scheduled in rigid time periods. This schedule, designed to facilitate students' transition from the early grades to high school, also illustrates how the school day for younger students is similar to that of elementary grades students, while the school day for older students may more closely resemble that of the high school they are preparing to enter.

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	Grade 6	**Grade 7**	**Grade 8**
25 min.	Homeroom Advisor/Advisee Period—1:20 ratio		
200 min.*	Academic Block 2 teachers: 60 students	Academic Block 4 teachers: 120 students 1/2 time counselor/teacher	Academic Block 4 teachers: 120 students 1/2 time teacher/counselor
45 min.	PHYSICAL EDUCATION		
45 min.	Required Exploratory Cycle (9 wks—Art, Music, Home Economics, Industrial Arts)	Required Exploratory Cycle (9 or 12 wks—Foreign Language, Business, Drama, Art)	Semester Elective
35 min.	High interest mini-courses (M-W-F) Intramural sports, schoolwide activities, clubs (T-Th)		
10 min.	HOMEROOM Advisor/Advisee Period		

* Includes 35 minutes lunch and 20 minutes passing time.

Such a schedule also assumes one or more periods each week during which teachers share common planning time. Such periods built into the school day provide teachers with time to consult with specialists who work with their students, design curricula over an extended time period, meet jointly with parents, discuss common approaches designed to meet the needs of specific students, or coordinate homework assignments. Such periods are essential to developing and sustaining the team.

4. Teacher-Based Guidance

Like curriculum, teaching approaches, organization, and scheduling, guidance in middle grades schools should evolve from the normal developmental needs of students ages 10 to 14. Consequently, counseling in the middle grades works best when it starts with an understanding that young adolescents are experiencing rapid cognitive, physical, and social-emotional changes and are engaged in the daily task of forming a firm self-identity. Guidance in middle grades is a means to meet the need for self-exploration that is common to all young adolescents rather than a tool to solve the extreme problems of some.

Middle grades guidance must be oriented toward helping all students maneuver through some of the confusion and excitement that come with the turf of early adolescence. As young people try out new roles and respond to the possibilities of their increasing independence and interaction in the world outside their families and schools, they face an ever-widening array of choices in behavior, personal relationships, dress, and interests. Middle grades guidance takes especially seriously the task of helping all students develop sound judgment to make decisions about difficult situations they face every day so that they can make choices that are not self-destructive.

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Guidance in middle grades schools is designed to be preventive rather than crisis-oriented and has an educational rather than clinical focus, allowing all students to participate without their being labeled "crazy" or their concerns labeled "problems." Such guidance programs can provide opportunities for young adolescents to develop aspirations and motivation for opportunities beyond high school by encouraging students to consider seriously all choices. A cohesive program can also help build the self-esteem, discipline, and academic preparation necessary to pursue these opportunities, particularly post-secondary education.

In some middle grades schools, guidance activities, because they are primarily educational rather than clinical, fall within the teaching domain and are scheduled into the school day as mini-courses. In other schools, the schedule also allots a longer homeroom time for an advisor-advisee program, and teachers may follow a specific homeroom curriculum which offers them a variety of activities designed to address the concerns of their advisees. In this way, the homeroom teacher acts as the advisor to approximately twenty or fewer students who may be assigned to the same teacher-advisor for their full tenure in the school. In these settings, the teacher-advisor may be freed from administrative functions usually associated with the homeroom period.

MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION IN FLUX

A review of current middle level practice paints a profile of schools that run the gamut from those that provide productive, challenging, and nurturing experiences for students in early adolescence to others that seriously jeopardize the futures of young adolescents because of their reliance on harmful practices (Fruchter, 1986; Lipsitz, 1984b; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). Moreover, while many educators actively promote innovative structures, others continue to insist on traditional approaches. While research has shown that many of the traditional responses to vulnerable students contribute to early school leaving, evidence is beginning to suggest that consciously designed alternatives can increase schools' holding power for vulnerable students. Such evidence, while rudimentary, signals to schools that choices they make regarding their structures, practices, and policies can make a difference to the lives of young adolescents at risk.

CHAPTER THREE

Documented evidence of successful schools for young adolescents, both nationally and in a district with large numbers of vulnerable students, suggests that schools can make a significant difference in the lives of dropout-prone youngsters entering adolescence. While middle grades schools alone cannot solve all problems which undermine school success for vulnerable students, schools can critique their own policies, practices, and routines to determine how they contribute to or detract from students' academic success and social growth and development. Given alternatives, schools for young adolescents have choices: they can adopt organizational structures, policies, and practices which are academically and developmentally challenging and nurturing, or they can pursue approaches which are academically and developmentally hazardous to their students.

ALTERNATIVES TO PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS AND STRENGTHEN SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP

We have already described ways in which grade retention, the abuse of tracking, the misuse of standardized testing, and the standardization of curriculum and instruction can contribute to school failure at all grade levels. Such policies may pose particular hazards to the learning and development of young adolescents. Cut off from alternative routes to competence and self-esteem and preoccupied with developing an acceptable identity, middle grades students who must repeat a grade or who are tracked into lower ability groups learn to define themselves as "losers." This self-definition may then narrow these students' aspirations and choices for future opportunities.

Moreover, just as school practices can undermine or promote middle grades students' opportunities for academic success, features of traditional middle and junior high schools can trigger students' doubts that they belong in school. Organizational structures and exclusionary practices that feed feelings of alienation also set the stage for early school leaving in that they discourage students' sense of membership and commitment to their school. We have already described practices related to attendance and suspension that can contribute to students' perceptions that their school rejects them as full members of the school community.

However, schools can make choices to organize their curriculum, instruction, and structural relationships in ways that increase possibilities for student success and enhance school membership for vulnerable students. The opportunities for making such choices also extend to school-based practices and policies which represent alternatives to hazardous practices of grade retention, tracking, suspension, and exclusion. We believe an honest examination of choices schools make in these areas is a necessary step in developing a comprehensive approach to dropout prevention in the middle grades.

Curriculum and Instruction

The finding that middle grades curriculum and teaching often assume basic reading comprehension skills when, in fact, 40 percent of the students have not yet mastered such skills suggests that curriculum and instruction in traditional middle grades are frequently not designed to meet the real academic needs of students in need of improving basic skills. For example, despite students' needs, reading occupied only three percent of the class time in the junior high school classrooms recently observed by researchers (Goodlad, 1984). Moreover, a departmental focus on subject matter may leave many junior high and middle school teachers unaware of young adolescents' needs for basic skill development. Teachers whose job is confined to teaching history or science, for example, may misinterpret poor performance as lack of motivation or interest when, instead, students lack adequate preparation in reading or mathematics at a level necessary to grasp new subject concepts.

Clearly, schools can make choices regarding the amount of time and attention they can devote to improving basic skills in the middle grades. This is not to say that we advocate a watered-down basic skills curriculum for students who have fallen behind their peers. To the contrary, developmental theory suggests that the middle grades represent a critical point in students' learning and a time when young adolescent students open up to and engage intensely in core academic disciplines. The task of the middle grades is to involve and challenge students in specific subject areas while simultaneously strengthening students' mastery of basic skills. Approaching this task through interdisciplinary curriculum units can reinforce basic skills while deepening students' understanding of specific areas of knowledge as they relate to broad themes.

Of equal concern are the teaching approaches employed every day in the classroom. Goodlad reports that most classroom time in the junior high schools his research team visited was devoted to teacher lectures, monitoring of students' seat-work, and preparation for assignments, three learning activities marked by passivity. While most teachers perceived they could control their choice of teaching techniques, few actually varied their instructional approaches or changed the focus of learning from textbooks, to films, to field trips, to library research. Moreover, interaction between teachers and individual students declined as students moved from elementary to secondary grades, limiting the amount of feedback, praise for good performance, quick correction of errors, and individualized instruction students receive.

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Goodlad reports that the repetitious activities and routinization of classrooms that characterize schooling at the middle level severely limit student achievement. He notes, too, that many students do adjust to the passive roles required of them. At the same time, he speculates that those who do not adjust to these roles may simply leave school when they have the opportunity, an insight of special relevance to the problem of early school leaving.

Since few middle grades teachers have had training in adolescent development, many may be unaware that the cognitive development of most young adolescents has typically reached only the brink of abstract thinking. Indeed, Goodlad's classroom observers noted that for most students, not simply middle grades students, academic learning is already too abstract. His researchers observed that students were most engaged in classes where they could learn through field trips, interviewing people, making collections, building things, or carrying out projects.

Yet middle grades teachers trained in a subject specialty often view learning activities which actively engage students in individual and group tasks as inappropriate for what they believe is their job of preparing students for high school. We suspect this lack of fit between traditional pedagogy's expectations and the real learning needs of young adolescents may be a feature which, on top of formal non-promotion and tracking practices and inattention to basic and developmental reading skills, contributes to many youngsters' academic failure in the middle grades. Taken together, these aspects of traditional middle grades schooling illustrate how school routines may limit success for young adolescents, particularly those most unable or unwilling to conform to the passive roles required by typical teaching techniques.

Schools can make pedagogical choices to improve the academic success of their students. For example, Goodlad proposes that teachers and principals assess the approaches used in their own classrooms so that teachers can help each other without threat of judgment from the district office.

Despite this dismal picture, it is clear to us that schools can make pedagogical choices to improve the academic success of their students. For example, Goodlad proposes that teachers and principals assess the approaches used in their own classrooms, perhaps with the help of neutral university professors or in collaboration with other schools, so that teachers can help each other without threat of judgment from the district office. He notes that all teachers can learn to vary teaching methods, employ diagnostic tests, give praise for good work, and provide regular comments on student performance. He also suggests that school surveys could result in teachers' increasing instructional time within the school day, resulting in improved student achievement at little cost.

In a recent report to the New York City Board of Education, the City's Middle School Task Force (1988) recommends that middle grades teachers move away from a lecture-presentation approach by actively engaging students in planning and developing the content of the core study. Citing young adolescents' needs for both concrete and abstract learning opportunities, the Task Force emphasizes the value of learning projects that promote depth through a shared approach. Such an approach would focus on specific themes of study chosen by teachers and students together. Study would then proceed to help students answer individually and in groups three basic questions: "What do I think I know about ___?" "What do I want to find out about ___?" and "How can I find out about___?" The Task Force suggests that such an approach can establish a solid foundation for learning how to learn in the middle grades which will reap benefits in later achievement.

School Size

School size can be a major factor contributing to students' sense of anonymity and alienation. Typically, students leave smaller "feeder" elementary schools for much larger and more impersonal middle or junior high schools. Overwhelming school size often combines with large class size and a brief homeroom period devoted to administrative matters to leave young adolescents without a strong sense of place or belonging.

Restructured middle grades schools, by comparison, can offer a wealth of opportunities to reduce the sense of alienation and anonymity that is often associated with large, impersonal schools. We have already noted that by creating "smallness within bigness," team teaching structures increase the probability that every student is known well by at least one adult, and often by several, who spend more than one period a day with each student. In schools with enrollments of 1,500 or more, the organization of teams into multi-grade "houses" or "schools-within-schools" may also enhance students' feelings of belonging. We have also noted that schools which adopt a home-base for students and include guidance resources as an educational component in the home-base program can also reduce anonymity and alienation.

Teacher Organization

Schools may also choose to restructure teacher interaction in ways that allow for greater coordination of curriculum and instruction, including help for students who learn in ways different from their peers and whose basic skills levels are not high enough to allow them to do well in subject areas. Organizing teachers into teams, for example, allows teachers to share information about individual students who are falling behind and to work together in such practical ways as coordinating homework assignments and communicating consistent messages to parents and auxiliary or non-school staff who may be working with such students. This arrangement gives vulnerable students the advantage of having to respond to one rather than many sets of expectations for success.

Organizing teachers into teams, for example, allows teachers to share information about individual students who are falling behind and to work together in such practical ways as coordinating homework assignments and communicating consistent messages to parents and auxiliary or non-school staff who may be working with such students.

Moreover, the team's focus on students, rather than on a specialized academic discipline, allows teachers to adapt curriculum to address individual basic skills needs. Such teams can also choose to revise and vary curriculum to benefit vulnerable students. If the team's focus is interdisciplinary, teachers can introduce subject material in an integrated rather than fragmented way. Because this approach is well-matched to young adolescents' cognitive functioning, its implementation increases all students' chances for success. In addition, ongoing opportunities to cross-reference learning among disciplines and to connect concrete examples from one discipline to the next introduce increased academic rigor into the learning experience.

Finally, team organization can become the vehicle for introducing an integrated alternative education choice within middle grades schools. Working together, team members can implement experiential curriculum and learning activities and increase individualized instruction. Goodlad (1984) notes that such practices are likely to benefit all students' academic performance. We discuss the special benefits alternative education may have for vulnerable middle grades students in our review of dropout prevention approaches at the middle level.

Scheduling

Traditional schooling for young adolescents can add further to the confusion and alienation engendered by large school size by scheduling students so that they may spend the school day going from class to class, spending no two classes with the same set of peers or the same teacher. With little opportunity for consistent interaction with either peers or adults in the building, vulnerable students may come to believe they will not be missed and may be more likely to cut individual classes after they have checked into their homeroom, eventually missing entire school days. By contrast, flexible block scheduling can reduce fragmentation of the school day, allow students to engage in projects in depth and provide opportunities for increased contact and continuity of relationships among students and between students and adults.

Alternatives to Retention in Grade

We have already noted that grade retention is a school practice that both undermines students' academic performance and contributes to dropping out. Consequently, schools committed to improving student achievement at the middle level must eliminate the practice of non-promotion. At the same time, they must embrace alternative responses which will promote student success.

Strategies designed to enhance academic success include promotion with remediation in an alternative setting, an alternative summer school program, or promotion to a classroom with fewer students to allow for more individualized attention, special resources, and accelerated learning.

At the middle level, schools can adopt a variety of approaches to support academic success of students learning at a pace slower than their peers. For example, schools can provide students with opportunities to work within a competency-based curriculum in multi-grade groupings. Other strategies designed to enhance academic success include promotion with remediation in an alternative setting, an alternative summer school program, or promotion to a classroom with fewer students to allow for more individualized attention, special resources, and accelerated learning. Such classrooms should emphasize effective teaching practices and alternative approaches, including cooperative learning activities, so that students are not simply repeating past failures or re-experiencing a curriculum that failed to engage them the first time around. In our discussion of specific dropout prevention approaches we examine several of these strategies in greater detail.

Alternatives to Sorting and Tracking Practices

Rooted in educational reforms of the 1920s, the traditional junior high school, while designed to help students stay in school longer by adapting the program to meet the needs of vulnerable students, was also conceived as a "testing and sifting ground for those who chose to withdraw from school after eighth or ninth grade" (Molitor and Dentler, p. 4). Ironically, however, it is this very feature of traditional middle grades schools which is now dysfunctional, both for individual students and for society as a whole. As our review of the literature notes, tracking and sorting practices often undermine student achievement and convey messages of rejection to vulnerable students, increasing the likelihood of such students' disengaging from school. Moreover, our society now needs schools which can engage all students through graduation while preparing an increasing percentage of graduates for higher education.

Within a district or school, superintendents and principals can purposefully assign the most innovative and experienced teachers to work with the most vulnerable students. At the same time, they can mobilize additional resources to enhance the teaching and curriculum for such students.

Schools can make choices to relieve the harmful effects of tracking through strategies related to teaching and allocation of resources. Within individual classrooms, teachers can introduce cooperative learning activities and projects designed to deepen students' knowledge about a topic and use the strengths of each student to support the effort of the whole group. Such activities allow students to build on their own strengths while learning from their peers.

Within a district or school, superintendents and principals can purposefully assign the most innovative and experienced teachers to work with the most vulnerable students. At the same time, they can mobilize additional resources to enhance the teaching and curriculum for such students. Such decisions can guard against the probability that without such precautions slower students would experience inferior teaching, curriculum, and resources.

Positive Choices to Improve Student Attendance

Schools can also make positive choices in relation to attendance policies and practices to ensure that policies are not so rigid and punitive as to exacerbate rather than improve school truancy or tardiness. In a recent report, the United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1987) cites personal, persistent contact with students' homes as an alternative to more punitive policies. This report notes, for example, that when teams of administrators in Cleveland made home visits to nearly 3,000 truant students, 22 percent returned to school where they received extra support services. In San Francisco, electronic home telephone calling programs boosted high school attendance by three percent in one year.

When teams of administrators in Cleveland made home visits to nearly 3,000 truant students, 22 percent returned to school where they received extra support services. In San Francisco, electronic home telephone calling programs boosted high school attendance by three percent in one year.

In Boston, school officials have implemented an attendance "buy back" policy as a way of persuading the most vulnerable students to return to school. Because many students who exceed the maximum number of absences allowed by the district's attendance policy give up on school altogether unless presented with opportunities for a second chance, principals may offer such students an opportunity to wipe one absence off their record for every five days of perfect attendance. Such an approach provides schools with a tool they can use to motivate truant students to return to school and gives truants themselves a concrete reason to change their behavior.

Other positive steps schools can take to improve attendance include establishing an attendance team responsible for monitoring attendance of truant students, developing protocols for interviewing students for their reasons for poor attendance, and working out contracts for improvement with students. In some districts, tardiness has nearly disappeared and attendance has improved when schools start offering an attractive federally-funded school breakfast to eligible students. Other schools identify the days of the week when attendance is lowest and plan high-interest activities or homeroom lotteries for prizes on that day. Finally, some schools whose students have severe and persistent attendance problems link up with community-based organizations whose workers reinforce the message that school is important and offer personal attention to those students (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1987).

Alternatives to Improve School Climate

Researchers at the Center for Early Adolescence (Lipsitz, 1984a; Dorman, 1984) and others, especially Rutter and his colleagues (1979), emphasize that less effective schools fail to distinguish between discipline and punishment. In those middle grades schools where discipline is viewed as separate from education rather than an integral part of learning, misbehavior is likely to be high. In such a climate, practices tend to rely on a narrow and punitive view of discipline. Discipline is seen as a battle for control of behavior rather than as the basis for building a community where individuals are interdependent and responsible to each other. Moreover, rules imposed on students by adults are not rules for which students assume "ownership." When students have few opportunities to make contributions to their school, effect positive change, assume responsibility, or address grievances, misbehavior increases as a function of students' increased sense of powerlessness, disenfranchisement, and alienation.

We have already noted that certain traditional middle grades practices may contribute to discipline problems at the middle level. For example, teaching staff without training in early adolescent development may attempt to control student behavior with a "Because I said so" approach when, in fact, young adolescents' need for participation in the life of their school makes it more appropriate and effective to set parameters for behavior and then negotiate specific rules with them. Moreover, the departmentalized structure of some schools may require students to conform to up to seven sets of rules for seven different teachers. Given that Ms. Jones in first period may allow talking, gum chewing, and working in small groups but Mr. Smith in second period may require students in their seats and silent at all times, a departmentalized structure puts students in the position of having to figure out a different set of rules for each teacher. Such a system can thwart even students with the best intentions for good behavior.

Improvements in school climate can come about through choices schools make about ways in which all members of the school community communicate with each other. One junior high school we know reported significant changes in climate when the principal began to meet in regular, informal sessions with the school's "troublemakers." Every four weeks, several of the students rotated out of the group, choosing others to take their place. Over the course of the year, the students expanded their own relationships with their peers, and the principal learned more about the students in non-disciplinary situations. In another school, the principal released a teacher from full-time classroom responsiblities so she could serve part-time as the School Climate Coordinator. In this role, she implemented mechanisms for broader participation by all students in designing school rules, introduced opportunities for "community meetings" for seventh and eighth graders where students could discuss and resolve problems of importance to them, and trained teachers and students in peer mediation techniques. Not coincidentially, suspension rates have dropped in both these schools.

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An improvement in school climate can also come about as the result of systematic teacher training for teachers responsible for the majority of disciplinary referrals. For example, in one Boston middle school, the annual number of student suspensions dropped from a high of 267 to fewer than 10 several years later when the principal identified the handful of teachers who appeared to have the most difficulty managing their classrooms. As a result of staff training and transfers of several teachers, the school is now one of the most orderly in that district (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986).

Finally, some schools are working to improve school and classroom climates by implementing Quality of School Life programs in individual schools. This approach introduces schoolwide training in problem solving techniques to help administrators, teachers, and students work together to solve school problems. These programs, modeled on the Quality of Work Life/Quality Circles used widely in industry, institutionalize participatory decision-making in schools and districts that adopt them (Schelkun, *et al.*, 1987).

Moreover, a project to implement a Quality of School Life program in Michigan has identified benefits to both students and teachers resulting in improved climate at the classroom level. When teachers implemented a program teaching problem-solving skills through a structured curriculum implemented in 15-minute daily segments, they found that students learned skills that helped them in their daily life, particularly in coping with emotionally-charged issues. Indeed, students who did not excel in traditional academic programs could frequently excel in this area of social competence. In addition, teachers reported benefits associated with use of new materials, the need to use less time for discipline, and opportunities to use problem-solving situations as a lead-in to academic assignments (Dignan and Schelkun, 1988; Hallarman, *et al.*, 1988). While this program has been adopted as part of a curriculum through sixth grade, we believe it could be applied effectively in the middle grades, perhaps during an extended homeroom period or through an interdisciplinary team as one part of a school climate improvement effort.

Alternatives to Suspension

A school climate that confuses discipline and punishment and that fails to enforce schoolwide rules consistently is also likely to be a breeding ground for high numbers of suspensions and expulsions. Indeed, in many middle grades schools, suspension is often the official response to school misbehavior. A recent study of Boston middle schools found that approximately 10 percent of all middle school students were suspended at least once every year. Approximately, 40 percent of these students received multiple suspensions. In one school year, 30 percent of all students in one middle school were suspended at least once. Most of these suspensions were for "school disruption," a catch-all category which can include behaviors ranging from name-calling and talking back to a teacher to fighting (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986).

Practices of team teaching, flexible scheduling, and teacher-based guidance can reduce discipline problems in the middle grades. George and Oldaker (1985) report that reorganization of middle grades to include these components reduces office referrals, suspensions, and vandalism. Moreover, they report teacher and staff confidence in managing disruptive students increases in schools where reorganization occurs. Teams of teachers working together can set common expectations for student behavior, thus sending a consistent message to all students. Principals in schools where fewer than 10 students are suspended every year tell us that the specific rules adopted by each team are less important than the teachers' and students' agreement on the rules for the team.

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Teaming and teacher-based guidance in particular can act in combination to reduce discipline problems by virtue of the effect these features have on relieving students' anonymity in the school. Such features can ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult in the school. Consequently, when behavior problems arise, at least one adult is likely to understand the circumstances contributing to the misbehavior and can tailor the response to the learning needs of each youngster.

As a popular practice adopted by many schools to reduce suspension rates, in-school suspension appears to present a preferable alternative to out-of-school suspension. However, in our experience, in-school suspension is likely to be effective only when it is one small part of a comprehensive approach to improving school climate and student discipline, when it is supervised, and when it includes both academic and social support for vulnerable students. Outside of such a context and without such resources, in-school suspension is open to abuse and is unlikely either to help individual students or reduce school disruption.

For example, in evaluations of ten in-school suspension programs, researchers have identified a variety of problems common to such approaches including counseling programs that fail to involve suspending staff members, policies which forbid students from completing classroom assignments while in in-school suspension or allow students to be suspended out of school while assigned to in-school suspension, and a lack of clearly defined goals and follow-up (Charbot and Garibaldi, 1982). For these reasons, we are cautious about prescribing in-school suspension as a real alternative to suspension. We place more faith in approaches that improve school climate generally and detail other more promising approaches in our section on dropout prevention programs.

Membership and Minority Students

Just as schools can make choices to improve their holding power for all students, some choices have specific relevance for minority students. Within the general context of school practices which leave many students at risk for school failure, alienation, and exclusion, the risks of school disengagement are even higher for minority students. We have already noted that much of the literature on school dropouts highlights the vulnerability of black and Hispanic students to early school leaving. We have also noted that minority students experience a disproportionate impact from academically harmful and developmentally hazardous practices of tracking, retention in grade, and suspension and that they enter the middle grades less prepared than white students. Moreover, minority students are frequently over-represented in special education programs, stigmatized by inappropriate placement in classes for students with forms of mental retardation, speech handicaps, and learning disabilities (Designs for Change, 1982; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1978; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985).

New York City's Middle School Task Force has noted that students may spend more time with their teachers every day than with either parent, a fact that reinforces students' needs for appropriate role models. The recommendation of the Task Force to recruit a more representative teaching force is relevant to many districts with large numbers of vulnerable minority students.

Certain school conditions in addition to these practices may contribute to school failure and alienation of minority students at all levels. Fine (1986), for example, in her study of a New York City high school, has commented on the school's division into a hierarchy of white teaching staff and minority aides, leaving minority students with few role models in positions of authority and decision-making. The lack of such role models is particularly unfortunate at a time when adolescent students are forming their sense of identity and place in the world.

Indeed, New York City's Middle School Task Force (1988) has noted that students may spend more time with their teachers every day than with either parent, a fact that reinforces students' needs for appropriate role models. The recommendation of the Task Force to recruit a more representative teaching force is relevant to many districts with large numbers of vulnerable minority students and parallels recommendations of the National Conference on Educating Black Children (1987). In its Blueprint for Action II, the National Conference emphasizes the need to adopt policies requiring that some faculty and staff represent the racial ethnic makeup of the student body in every school.

Moreover, the presence of black educators within a school may be key to helping black students overcome what anthropologists Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have called the "burden of 'acting white.'" They note that black students who participate to their capacity in the academic life of their school risk both lack of acceptance by white students who refuse to acknowledge their intellectual achievements and a sense of betrayal of other black students for "acting white." Many black students consequently may adopt coping strategies which include truancy, irregular class attendance, and acting out in clowning ways, behavior which may land them in trouble. These researchers urge special programs, including counseling, to help students cope with the stress of achievement and membership and to reinforce black identity within the academic context.

Cummins (1986) has argued that the failure of schools to incorporate students' culture into school routines and curriculum also works to disable Hispanic students. Indeed, linguistic minority children may frequently attend schools in which not one staff member speaks the language spoken in the students' homes. This situation generally discounts students' culture and specifically leaves many students without support in schools which have no mechanism for parent involvement in even the most routine matters connected with students' education (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). Such schools have limited ability to engage the parents of students who show early signs of disengagement, including school failure, tardiness, truancy, or persistent misbehavior. Moreover, these students are at a significant disadvantage compared to English-speaking students in terms of the resources available to engage at-risk students before they drop out. Most vulnerable are Hispanic language-minority students who tend to do more poorly in school than other language-minority groups (Steinberg, *et al.*, 1984).

In our view, most literature from the middle schools movement has not as yet seized the opportunity to apply the potential of middle grades organizational structures and practices to the task of meeting the serious needs of vulnerable minority students. However, to the extent that advocates for successful middle grades schools share the belief of the effective schools movement that it is not students' background but schools' response to students' background that determines success in school, middle grades schools can begin to address the disparities between the experiences of white and minority students in schools. For example, George and Oldaker (1985) report that reorganization of middle grades to include exemplary practices of interdisciplinary teaming resulted in improved racial climates, with black students in teamed schools perceiving school as significantly better than black students in non-teamed schools.

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Research from the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at The Johns Hopkins University (1987) also suggests that features particular to successful middle grades schools may have special benefits for vulnerable minority students. In a special report on the effects of middle grades organizational structures on student-teacher relations and instruction, researchers conclude that middle grades organized to resemble elementary grades—including cross-discipline classes with a single teacher, particularly in the sixth grade—are especially beneficial for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These findings provide some indication that middle grades schools that adopt such practices can improve their responsiveness to poor minority students.

Finally, middle grades schools can review their curriculum from the perspective of minority students. Schools can give attention not only to students' cultural backgrounds but to students' current life situations as a way of increasing continuity between "school knowledge" and "real knowledge." Fine (1987) has noted that when schools fail to address the realities of racism and discrimination in students' lives, they effectively "silence" students, treating them as if they were invisible and their lives as if they were unreal. Such conditions call into question minority students' membership in school at its most basic core.

STRENGTHENING MEMBERSHIP ROLES OF TEACHERS

In May, 1986, the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy called for an increased role for teachers in our schools and identified choices schools could make to improve the status of teachers in the school community. The Forum called for a restructuring of schools to provide a professional environment for teaching, the designing of new systems to train teachers, and the redefining of salaries and career opportunities competitive with those in other professions. Current practice in public schools in general and middle grades in particular now falls far short of this ideal. To the contrary, teachers in all parts of the country report they are accorded little respect in their schools. They speak of being excluded from most levels of decision-making, of not being sufficiently respected by school officials, and of not being asked or allowed to contribute their ideas to improve school organization.

The sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement felt by teachers should be of particular concern to educators and policy-makers concerned about students at risk of dropping out. Researcher Michelle Fine (1983, 1986) has suggested that teachers who receive little respect in their schools will, in turn, accord little respect to the young people they work with, conditions which contribute to student alienation. Reporting that school staff who relate that "no one around here listens to me" are those most likely to belittle or underrate students, she concludes, "The disempowered teacher may help to produce the disempowered student who, more often than not, in city schools, drops out" (Fine, 1986, p. 399).

In contrast, the portraits of successful schools for young adolescents painted by Lipsitz (1984b) highlight teachers who are engaged in their work and active in formulating school policies. Such teachers frequently extend themselves beyond their narrow job descriptions. Moreover, specific practices in their schools allow teachers to participate fully in the decisions most closely related to their day-to-day work decisions involving student learning and school climate. In the middle grades schools studied by Lipsitz, resources, decision-making, and accountability were decentralized. Teachers organized into teams under flexible scheduling plans made important decisions related both to learning activities and the scheduling of those activities every day. Thus, if teachers planned a science experiment lasting 90 minutes one day, they could compensate the next day for the mathematics time lost.

In teams, no one teacher can make a decision regarding a student's program without the participation of all teachers. For example, if one teacher wants to try a new instructional approach for students learning at a slower pace, (s)he will need the cooperation and support of other teachers on the team to achieve maximum effectiveness. Teaming strengthens teachers' decision-making role while increasing responsibility to both their colleagues and students.

The New York City Middle School Task Force (1988) identifies a related benefit to teaming. Emphasizing the shared nature of learning and teaching, the Task Force reports that when students are assigned to groups of adults, rather than to individual teachers, the adults are less likely to be defensive about their habits and styles of teaching. Consequently, teamed teachers may be more open both to trying new approaches and to incorporating new teachers in a fashion that is more child-oriented. Such findings suggest that the team may be a vehicle both to enhance teacher decision-making and to facilitate on-going professional development.

When teachers have increased opportunities to participate in the life of their school, their sense of worth grows proportionately. In national hearings, many teachers described the sense of renewed interest in their work that emerged when they became participants in effecting school change (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985). Based on extensive work with middle grades schools, Dorman (1987) has described similar impact on staff who embark on a participatory planning process which results in a school-based plan for reform.

An expanded role for teachers, of course, is highly dependent on principals' ability to redefine their own roles. When the principal holds on to decision-making power on one hand or maintains that (s)he has no power in light of centralized directives on the other, teachers have limited opportunity to participate fully in school decisions. The successful schools which Lipsitz describes all have principals who are not afraid to delegate responsibility to their teachers or ignore or contradict directives from their supervisors in the school bureaucracies when they believe such directives would undermine their school's purpose. These principals create a school climate in which teachers and administrators alike understand that what they do has an impact on the working of the school as a whole (Lipsitz, 1984b). Such a model offers an antidote to the powerlessness expressed by teachers in many middle level schools.

COLLABORATION WITH PARENTS

Increasingly, researchers are learning that parents have a crucial role to play in the education of their children and that the more contact between teachers and parents the greater the gains of the students (Chall and Snow, 1988). Whether through teacher-parent conferences, requests by teachers that parents read or watch television with their children, or invitations to parents to observe the classroom, such contact increases the advantage of children in school (Epstein, 1986). However, despite these benefits, parents' involvement in their children's school drops off dramatically in the middle grades (Lucas and Lusthaus, 1978, in Epstein, 1987b). This decrease in parent-school interaction at the intermediate level may also diminish the holding power of the school for vulnerable students.

Alternatively, middle grades schools that make conscious choices to involve parents can increase their holding power through affirming students' membership in school by extendng participation in the school mission to students' parents. This choice to extend membership to include parents can mean helping parents create more "school-like families," but they must also involve school choices to create more "family-like schools" (Epstein, 1987a). Efforts, for example, to establish a parents room in each school or to involve parents in policy-making decisions can help blur the boundaries between home and school and expand the definition of who belongs in the school. Moreover, a school that chooses to blur further the home-school distinction by incorporating adult education, GED, or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for its students' parents under its roof may act decisively to enhance its holding power. Recent evidence that an extra grade attainment for the mother is associated with an extra half-grade equivalent of achievement for her children argues persuasively for such a choice (Sum and Taggart, forthcoming, in Berlin and Sum, 1988).

Moreover, principals can make systematic efforts to train teachers about the benefits of involving parents (Epstein, 1987b). Teachers need to know that parents can complement their work in a variety of ways. They also need to learn skills that can allow them to take the initiative in promoting greater collaboration.

COLLABORATION WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Increasingly, those concerned with the needs of vulnerable students have concluded that schools need the help of other sectors of society in addressing those needs. Several researchers in the areas of middle grades education and school dropouts have suggested that schools could benefit from stronger collaborations with human service programs in the community (Lipsitz, 1986; Mann, 1986; Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). However, their studies have indicated that most schools, including schools for young adolescents, have limited relationships, at best, with community-based social service groups. Problems related to "turf" as well as professional rivalries, among other factors, typically stand in the way of effective cooperation (Lefstein, 1986).

Our review of the literature related to both middle grades education and dropping out suggests that the weak links between schools and community groups shortchange vulnerable students. Students most vulnerable to dropping out are also most likely to be poor, minority, and have significant social problems. These students are in greatest need of a multiplicity of resources.

Community-based organizations, by virtue of their position outside the schools, can frequently offer fresh perspectives on programming for students at risk of dropping out. Earle and her co-researchers (1987), for example, found that a striking number of "promising programs" for vulnerable girls, especially in the middle grades, in all parts of the country had been conceived and implemented by such organizations as Camp Fire and Girls Clubs. Earle speculates that such groups have greater independence to address needs seen as specific to girls, especially in the areas of sexuality education and pregnancy prevention, and are acting on their historical mission to engage young women in positive activities of benefit to themselves and their communities. Whatever the reason, the scope of their programs is evidence of deep commitment to the needs of vulnerable students on the part of those groups. We envision new efforts to harness this commitment to energize schools' collaborative efforts in support of vulnerable students.

In addition, community human service agencies are often in a position to provide resources which schools typically may not know how to locate. For example, service agencies can act as surrogate parents in attendance or disciplinary matters when parents are unavailable. Such agencies are often closer to students' home communities and can build bridges between home and school, providing interpretation of school policies to parents and helping schools better understand the customs and traditions of students whose cultural background may be unfamiliar to school staff. In our experience, however, few schools for young adolescents are aware of available community resources, and staff in most lack training in how to use them.

In addition, community human service agencies are often in a position to provide resources which schools typically may not know how to locate. Such agencies are often closer to students' home communities and can build bridges between home and school, providing interpretation of school policies to parents and helping schools better understand the customs and traditions of students whose cultural background may be unfamiliar to school staff.

Middle grades schools which adopt the goal of increasing their responsiveness to students' developmental needs as part of their mission are in a unique position to build bridges to human services agencies. In response to students' need for meaningful opportunities for participation in the community, schools may develop internships in service agencies as part of their curriculum. Such internships may lead to students' increased understanding of the availability of services, broaden student access to resources, and provide knowledge which students may use should they or their families need supportive services. Moreover, within schools, fully functioning teams become a vehicle to include social workers or counselors from outside agencies, either to offer services to students or to enrich the teams' understanding of the community context surrounding their students.

CONCLUSION

The current status of middle level education reflects changing educational theory and practice about both the mission and structure of the middle grades. The fact that successful schools for young adolescents do exist implies that many more can exist. However, while many middle grades schools have adopted features that attend to the needs of young adolescents—including team teaching, an interdisciplinary focus, flexible scheduling, and teacher-based guidance—many others maintain practices which are developmentally and educationally a poor match with the needs of their students. Lessons from effective middle grades schools may offer new directions in dropout prevention and serve as guides for choices middle level schools can make so that all students succeed.

Schools have choices open to them. By assessing their structures, policies, and practices self-consciously and honestly, they can begin to determine whether the choices they have made are educationally enhancing or educationally hazardous for vulnerable students. Such an examination is an essential step both in determining ways to help individual students and in charting new directions for school improvement. New directions, in turn, may indicate the need for specific dropout prevention efforts at the middle grades level.

CHAPTER FOUR

DROPOUT PREVENTION AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

Literature on school dropouts rarely focuses specifically on the unique needs of middle grades students. By the same token, literature on middle level schools barely makes reference to students at risk of dropping out. However, literature on school dropouts and reports on innovative approaches for educating young adolescents together offer a base from which to formulate tentative notions about ways in which policies, practices, and programs at the middle level can address the problem of early school leaving.

Current research on school dropouts, for example, makes clear that early school leaving has roots in both student characteristics, and school processes. Schools can and must help vulnerable students cope with the social circumstances that put them at risk. However, schools can and must also change the school-based experiences that contribute to dropping out.

Literature focused on successful schools for young adolescents provides an additional dimension to thinking about dropout prevention at the middle level. Above all else, practices in schools for young adolescents must reflect a commitment to the mutually complementary goals of academic effectiveness and responsiveness to students' developmental needs. In schools identified as successful, educators acknowledge the ever-changing nature of young adolescents and view all school practices and policies through a developmental lens, adapting policies and practices to account for individual differences of their students.

Merging these trends in the literature, we can begin to formulate a role for middle grades schools in dropout prevention. Weaving the findings together, however, reveals a tension between two broad approaches. On one hand, much of the dropout literature implies that prevention efforts should be oriented toward student deficits, with a focus on "fixing" students' problems. On the other hand, literature on successful middle grades schools suggests that any dropout prevention strategy in the middle grades must have as a central focus a school improvement process designed with the goal of establishing policies, practices, and structures that strengthen the holding power of each school and encourage vulnerable students to stay in school.

FEELING OUR WAY: A LACK OF EVIDENCE FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Early school leaving both as a problem affecting individual students, each with a unique cluster of high risk characteristics and experiences, and as a policy matter is complex. Solutions as well are bound to be complicated. Since dropping out can be seen as both a symptom of problems young adolescents have in and out of school and a symptom of ineffective schools, addressing one set of problems alone may not make a significant difference in helping students stay in school.

Our literature review suggests that a comprehensive dropout prevention strategy in middle grades schools must simultaneously include both academic and social support for vulnerable students along with an assessment of school policies and practices that undermine a school's holding power for all its young adolescent students. Both components are essential. It makes little sense to develop a program to increase motivation for students at risk without addressing ways in which the routinized tasks of a standardized curriculum ensure that many students will find much of the school day boring and unchallenging. Nor is a specialized program designed to improve self-esteem likely to matter to students in schools where high non-promotion or suspension rates are regular reminders of students' inadequacies.

Much of the current literature focuses on programs for school dropouts or for students deemed to be at risk of dropping out, most of which have been developed in the absence of clear evidence that such efforts will produce positive results. A recent overview of the problem lists twelve diverse examples of programs that could fall under the category of dropout prevention. These range from "Enhancing the self-image of elementary school children" to "A computerized index of commercially available curricula organized by objectives for academic skills, attitudes, and job-performance skills" (Mann, 1986). Researchers have pointed out that programs have made little impact on a 25 percent dropout rate that has persisted over 25 years, an indication that our level of knowledge about what really works to reduce dropping out is limited (Mann, 1986; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986).

A comprehensive dropout prevention strategy in middle grades schools must simultaneously include both academic and social support for vulnerable students along with an assessment of school policies and practices that undermine a school's holding power for all its young adolescent students.

Indeed, few programs have been subjected to careful evaluation or have produced documented effects. In a recent survey of local dropout prevention programs, the United States General Accounting Office (1987) reported that of 479 responses from program administrators, only 20 included rigorous evaluations. As Michael A. Bailin, President of Public/Private Ventures, has noted, adequate research on which to base a judgment of existing programs is not available (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987). Despite the lack of solid data supporting one approach over another, many schools, particularly at the high school level, continue to invest time and money into a plethora of programs in hopes of helping some individual students and reducing the dropout rate.

For the most part, the proliferation of new dropout prevention programs reflects good-faith efforts on the part of our schools and communities to meet the needs of vulnerable young people. But these efforts also represent a triumph of hope over experience. While we believe new approaches can help individual students, the lack of evidence leads us to be cautious about endorsing any one approach, even when it seems to be rooted in common sense. Because we know all too well that practices such as grade retention and suspension also flourish because they "make sense," persisting despite research that indicates their ineffectiveness in improving the achievement or behavior of vulnerable students, we are also aware that common sense may not be the best guide to program effectiveness.

Moreover, we are increasingly aware that some programs designed in the name of dropout prevention may actually work against students' attachment to school. Mary Anne Raywid (1987), for example, notes that the development of in-school suspension programs or programs for "disruptive" students are among the least useful of the dropout prevention models. As evidence, she points to the State of Florida where, despite placement of 57,605 students in in-school suspension and 16,811 students in isolated programs for "disruptive" and "disinterested" students in one school year, an evaluation by the Executive Office of the Governor concluded that such programs resulted in no improvement in suspension, expulsion, dropout, court referral, or corporal punishment rates. In fact, Florida has one of the country's highest dropout rates and is the state most likely to administer corporal punishment. It appears that punitive programs that segregate students from their peers have no place on the list of promising programs for dropout prevention despite the persistence of this model.

While inadequate knowledge about what works along with a misdiagnosis of the problem and misguided design of potential solutions hampers us on the one hand, several other barriers stand in the way of implementing effective dropout prevention strategies. Schorr and Schorr (1988), for example, have noted that even when we are persuaded of the effectiveness of particular preventive approaches, we may not be able to prove they are affordable. Moreover, successful programs are often diluted by replication and suffer as they become increasingly bureaucratized. Finally, as important as a program model is, the way a program is run and the people who implement it are equally important. In our experience, successful programs frequently work because of specific people who run them. When replicated, they are not always implemented as intended, resulting inevitably in disappointment and discouragement on the part of educators, students, parents, and the public. We urge practioners to consider these factors in the development of dropout prevention strategies at the local level.

Despite these reservations about endorsing any specific programs, we believe exposure to the variety of programs currently operating can provide guidance for thinking about dropout prevention at the middle level. Existing programs are evidence of a high level of energy and commitment of a number of individuals, schools, and communities for helping vulnerable students stay in school. Perhaps more important, many programs frequently represent a source of new ideas for practitioners who want to use the innovations of discrete programs to reform the educational mainstream for all students.

PROMISING APPROACHES TO DROPOUT PREVENTION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Descriptions of programs which appear "promising" if not guaranteed to prevent dropping out have recently appeared in a variety of publications (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986; Cipollone, 1986; Earle, *et al.*, 1987; Florida Department of Education, 1986; General Accounting Office, 1987; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1986, 1987; Orr, 1987). Most programs described represent secondary prevention efforts in that they are designed to address symptoms of school failure or alienation before students have disengaged from school completely but after students are identified as "at-risk." Typically, programs are implemented for high school age students; programs for middle grades students appear less frequently in the literature. Only one source limited to one district describes "promising practices" at the middle level (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). The Children's Defense Fund will publish a more extensive list in late 1988.

Dropout prevention programs described as promising in the literature typically fall into three major categories. First are programs which primarily address academics, usually designed for students who have fallen behind in their school work. Second are programs which emphasize a vocational education component. Third are programs which emphasize counseling and social services, sometimes for specific populations such as pregnant and parenting students, sometimes for students who refer themselves or are referred by school staff. Within each category, most efforts are conceived as "add-on" programs, existing at the margins of the traditional school experience. Often developed out of the concern of one particular teacher, many are funded by "soft" money. In recent years, as the dropout problem has become more widely acknowledged and discussed, these programs, while still add-ons, have become more institutionalized, but many are still seen as the last stop students make before stepping out the schoolhouse door.

In the following pages, we highlight some of the programs typically found in each category and assess their relevance for the middle grades. At the same time, we raise concerns about dropout prevention approaches which rely solely on add-ons, particularly in districts with large numbers of students at risk. Finally, we argue that school improvement and revitalization efforts to improve schools' holding power for all students should be included as a fourth essential component of a comprehensive dropout prevention strategy.

1. Academic and Remedial Approaches to Dropout Prevention

Vulnerable students in the middle grades are clearly in need of academic support which can address their basic skills deficits. Most in need are those students who score in the bottom fifth of basic skills tests. For example, 21 percent of 14- to 15-year old students scoring in the lowest quintile on such tests had dropped out of school two years later compared to 3 percent of those in the highest quintile (Berlin and Sum, 1988).

While remediation is urgently needed for vulnerable students, academic support in the middle grades must be presented in such a way as to meet the specific needs of young adolescents. Wehlage (1983b), for example, has noted that this approach is often founded on a narrow definition of students' problems which fails to account for students' broader developmental needs. He warns that remediation has typically focused on mindless rote learning and is rarely compatible with adolescents' cognitive developmental stage which requires a bridging of the gap between concrete and abstract thinking.

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The Institute for Educational Leadership (1987) describes what may be more successful remediation strategies for at-risk youth. In particular, IEL cites competency-based, computer-assisted instruction combined with traditional pen and paper approaches as holding promise for helping potential dropouts acquire skills. Other approaches described by IEL include the self-paced, individualized, and competency-based approach of the Comprehensive Competency Program, year-round school programs, and summer enrichment programs. Of special interest in IEL's review is the Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP), sponsored by Public/PrivateVentures, combining paid summer jobs, academic remediation, and family/life skills, which we also review in this overview of prevention approaches.

Developmentally Responsive, Accelerated Remediation

Typically, students who have fallen behind are relegated to a slower and more boring curriculum characteristic of their lower track status. However, students with poor basic skills who are overage for grade need accelerated rather than slower learning opportunities designed so that they can catch up with their peers before entering secondary school. Levin (1986, 1987) has suggested that such programs include a variety of teaching approaches including software designed for home entertainment and geared to increase student interest in learning, and brief daily sessions of "drill and practice." Computer-assisted instruction, which allows students of all abilities to begin at their own level and move forward, must be a key component. Such programs should extend into the summer months and should set a deadline to close the achievement gap for students in need so that students do not find themselves placed permanently in these settings. Moreover, teachers assigned to such classes should be experienced in using innovative techniques for vulnerable students and should gear teaching to increasing students' excitement about a subject area. Based on evidence presented on the effectiveness of similar high school level programs (Congressional Budget Office, 1980, in Pritchard, *et al.*, ND), we urge that such approaches be integrated into the total curriculum rather than provided as a separate effort.

In a look at efforts to improve the academic skills of students at risk of dropping out, within a framework that is responsive to students' developmental needs, Davidson and Koppenhaven (1988) have described several Chapter I and second language programs which are successful in raising skill levels of young adolescents. Characteristics of these efforts include a respected role for teachers in the program, administrators who facilitate success, students engaged in learning, and curricula and materials based on the students' own interests. These programs are targeted to students in greatest need, and their characteristics suggest that remedial programs should not simply replicate the conditions of students' regular classrooms. Programs that are truly different can reduce the likelihood of school failure by strengthening basic skills in a challenging and developmentally responsive way.

Summer Programs

Research involving large numbers of school children and students in compensatory learning programs suggests that 80 percent of the difference between advantaged and disadvantaged children in year-to-year learning occurs during the summer.

While vulnerable students begin school behind their more advantaged peers, the gaps in achievement are significantly greater by the time students reach the middle grades. In part, these differences can be attributed to learning loss which disadvantaged children experience over the summer. Indeed, research involving large numbers of school children and students in compensatory learning programs suggests that 80 percent of the difference between advantaged and disadvantaged children in year-to-year learning occurs during the summer (Heyns, 1978, 1987, in Berlin and Sum, 1988; Sipe, *et al.*, 1987).

Since 1984, Public/Private Ventures of Philadelphia has worked to develop a model to reduce learning loss for 14- and 15-year-olds through its Summer Training and Employment Program (STEP), operated in five sites nationwide. Eligible students are at high risk of dropping out because of low performance on basic skills tests, history of non-promotion, and low-income status. They enroll in the program for two consecutive summers and one intervening school year. During the summer, students receive intensive academic instruction, including computer-assisted activities and silent sustained reading, life skills instruction, and part-time paid work opportunities. During the school year, students meet with counselors who monitor their progress.

Analysis of STEP results to date suggest that this approach has several important effects that improve students' chances of staying in school. Students enrolled in STEP experienced less summer learning loss and better chances for promotion the following year than their counterparts in a control group. Moreover, participants were more likely than youth in the control group to use contraceptives if they were sexually active (Sipe, *et al.*, 1987). Such findings suggest that summer programming for at-risk middle grades students can help sustain students' commitment to their education at a point at which they are on the brink of entering the more demanding high school grades.

The STEP model offers other important lessons for practitioners developing summer programs for vulnerable middle grades students. First, the program benefits from collaboration between public schools and community-based organizations in each site. Second, and perhaps most significant, the program is not purely academic in its orientation but takes into account developmental and work needs of students. Typically, young adolescents are too old for summer day camp but too young for full-time employment. We believe that summer programs for middle grades students must consider this unique position of young adolescents and use the summer months both to reinforce academic learning and to open up new opportunities for students to explore their communities and themselves.

Typically, young adolescents are too old for summer day camp but too young for full-time employment. We believe that summer programs for middle grades students must consider this unique position of young adolescents and use the summer months both to reinforce academic learning and to open up new opportunities for students to explore their communities and themselves.

One such program for sixth, seventh, and eighth graders has been developed by the Thompson Island Education Center in Boston. Working with middle grades inner-city "C students" whose teachers believe they are not reaching their potential, the Center offers a year-round program designed to enhance academic achievement. During the six-week residential summer sessions, students receive academics every morning, including field-oriented science activities, computers, and language arts. Afternoons are devoted to adventure activities, a ropes course, and sports that appeal to young adolescents' needs for physical activities and channel risk-taking in ways that develop group cohesiveness and individual competence. Evening sessions offer exploratory activities in the arts and theater. Finally, students' summer accomplishments are reinforced during the school year through tutoring and homework assistance provided at a local Boys and Girls Club. In the fall, students commit themselves to remediation by signing a contract with program staff obligating students to work toward goals which they set themselves for the school year.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning, a teaching strategy developed and researched at The Johns Hopkins University, is another remedial approach that appears to have special promise for young adolescent students. Working with rather than against middle grades students' normal need for positive peer interaction, students in cooperative learning groups are assigned tasks which require information-sharing and problem-solving, sometimes in a game format, in small groups. When student assignment to cooperative learning groups varies, this strategy represents a positive alternative to tracking and ability grouping and an approach which can balance the passive approaches to learning that are not successful with vulnerable students.

Research suggests that when students' learning is assessed individually and the group is rewarded collectively, students master academics more successfully than through competitive approaches or strategies demanding individual seat-work (*Harvard Education Letter*, 1986). Moreover, students assigned cooperative learning tasks persist longer in their efforts to solve problems presented. Such approaches also have potential to make learning more socially acceptable for young adolescents, and there is some evidence that black and Hispanic students learn especially well in cooperative groups. Moreover, cooperative learning is an approach that is clearly compatible with early adolescent needs for diversity, participation, and social interaction, and can promote student skills in getting along with others.

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Cross-Age Tutoring

Worthy of note as an especially promising remedial approach is cross-age tutoring. A recent report in the Harvard Education Letter (1987) describes a number of programs which train both high school and middle grades students with skill deficits—and sometimes behavioral and attendance problems as well —to tutor younger students. In well-designed programs, tutors learn at least as much and often more than their tutees. In one program, teenage tutors from special education classes for emotionally disturbed students showed gains in academics, attendance, and discipline. Tutors' averages on tests and quizzes rose from 60 to 85 percent; absences fell from one a week to one per month; and disciplinary referrals dropped drastically.

Montemayor (1986) has also described how a cross-age tutoring program works as a dropout prevention program in San Antonio. In the developmentally-responsive program he describes, the role of "helper" provides young adolescents with opportunities to participate in the life of their school and community, expand their social interaction with adults and students, and define themselves in a positive role. Moreover, among tutors, themselves dropout-prone youth, dropout rates, absenteeism, and behavior problems are greatly reduced (Lewis, 1987). Cross-age tutoring may also be cost-effective. Studying a cross-age tutoring program in Boise, Idaho, researchers found that the cost of $212 per child produced twice as much learning for the tax payer dollar as computer-assisted instruction and more than three times as much as reducing class size or lengthening the school day (Levin and Meister, 1986).

2. Vocational Services to Prevent Dropping Out

A vocational component is traditionally thought of as essential to any successful dropout program for secondary students (Hamilton, 1986). However, success depends to some extent on the age of students enrolled in the program, the manner in which it is implemented and the extent to which it interfaces with academic and social supports. In a report on vocational programs and youth employment prepared for the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Youth and America's Future, Thomas Smith (1987) and others of Public/Private Ventures reviewed and made recommendations for research and programs for high risk youth. Based on their evaluations of youth employment programs, they conclude, "Youth's needs tend to follow a sequence by age, with education-based services most appropriate for younger youth and services oriented toward the labor market (skills training in particular) most appropriate for older youth" (Smith, p. 30).

This emphasis on developmentally- and age-appropriate programs echos concerns of other researchers. Wehlage (1983b), for example, has reported that most dropout programs for high school students have a strong orientation toward specific skill training or a work experience focus designed to socialize students to the attitudes and work habits required in the world of work. Wehlage also found that while vocational training has been most successful with young adults over 18, a finding confirmed by Hamilton, work experience programs have had minimal impact on personal qualities needed for long-term success in the adult world. He contends that the missing piece in such programs is attention to developmental needs.

Reviewing the work of the National Supported Work Demonstration, the Alternative Youth Employment Strategies Project, Job Corps, Jobs for Youth, and Project Redirection, the Institute for Educational Leadership (1987) also notes the mixed results of vocational programs even for older teenagers. The Institute for Educational Leadership concludes, "Isolated work experience will not reclaim impoverished and troubled youths. What will work is a comprehensive, integrated approach in which each element is strengthened and reinforced by the other components of the program" (p. 59). The implication of such observations is that vocationally-oriented programs which do not take into account the needs of the whole child will fall short of their intended effects.

Implications for the Middle Grades

These lessons have special implications for dropout prevention programs at the middle level. Vocationally-oriented dropout prevention programs as currently designed appear to have limited benefits for middle grades students at risk precisely because they lack a developmental focus. Unlike older adolescents who may enter vocational programs with some, albeit limited, work experience, young adolescents are just beginning to see themselves in relation to the world of work.

Because young adolescents have specific developmental needs, vocationally-oriented programs must be completely redefined for the middle grades. Appropriate programs must take into account young adolescents' needs for social interaction with their peers and adults and for meaningful participation in their community. Exposure to a diversity of occupational situations through projects which link students with community mentors, for example, can provide students with role models who can influence students' motivation and aspirations. When such opportunities are combined with guidance support and curricular activities which encourage self-exploration, students may more concretely come to appreciate the relevance of schooling and the benefits of staying in school and may begin to formulate goals, however tentative, for themselves in the future. For example, specific courses can require students to interview adults in different occupational fields or incorporate guest speakers into courses on unions, architecture, science or other fields that may relate to students' need to explore the larger community. Sensitivity to the developmental needs of young adolescents should result in a holistic approach that encourages exploration and does not narrow options.

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The Early Adolescent Helper Program affiliated with City University of New York is one example of a program which expands the horizons of young adolescent students by assigning them to work on a two-days-a-week basis in day care centers and nursing homes, and similar programs are taking hold in many districts and states. For example, Youth Service America, a Washington-based organization dedicated to providing all young people with opportunities for community service, is currently expanding its focus to involve middle grades youngsters. On a state level, Minnesota is providing grants of up to $5,000 to junior and senior high schools to start or expand community service opportunites. Such programs tap into young adolescents' idealism while expanding their sense of their own value to their communities as they test themselves in new roles. Community-based "work" opportunities are most beneficial when they are structured, supervised by caring adults, integrated with academic learning, and implemented along with a built-in opportunity for students to reflect on and discuss their experiences with other students (Wehlage, 1983a).

Community internships, mentoring relationships, or other vocational awareness components developed as part of a middle grades dropout prevention strategy may be most effective when such approaches are implemented as part of the broader curriculum, allowing students to earn credits toward grade promotion, rather than as add-on programs targeted for potential dropouts.

Recent research on high schools with lower-than-expected dropout rates suggests dropout prevention services may be more effective when they are offered as part of an array of preventive services in the mainstream rather than as a separate alternative add-on program for at-risk students (Cipollone, 1987). This finding has important implications for the way in which middle level educators consider vocationally-oriented services. We believe that community internships, mentoring relationships, or other vocational awareness components developed as part of a middle grades dropout prevention strategy may be most effective when such approaches are implemented as part of the broader curriculum, allowing students to earn credits toward grade promotion, rather than as add-on programs targeted for potential dropouts. Indeed, Youth Service America reports that an increasing number of schools are offering community service opportunities either as a requirement for graduation, as in Atlanta, or as a voluntary program, as in Los Angeles (Lewis, 1987). Such efforts can serve as a positive alternative to the narrowed curriculum imposed by standardized curriculum and teaching.

3. Counseling and Social Services

In addition to academic and vocational components, strong counseling and social services are frequently mentioned as part of a comprehensive dropout prevention effort. Such counseling takes various shapes from school district to district, depending on the needs of the students, the schools' resources, and the philosophy guiding the effort. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (1986) describes counseling programs which include peer counseling, "teacher advocate," "classroom counselor," and intensive case management models. In addition, many schools use counselors as consultants for teachers, for planning curriculum, and for teaching courses on interpersonal skills and personal growth. Other schools have more elaborate arrangements through which public and private human service agencies agree to provide social services staff to schools while schools provide space and support, allowing the delivery of services to take place in a school-based location. Services may include individual and family counseling as well as student activity groups.

Services to Improve Attendance

When schools collaborate with community-based organzations, the mission of the school is extended into the students' community with potential for holding on to students most at risk of dropping out. For example, a youth-serving organization in Boston has initiated the "Best Year in School Ever" Program, a community-based effort to get truant children back to school, engage students who youth workers know to have serious school attendance problems and provide follow-up and support both at school and in the community. Students commit themselves to meeting the terms of individually designed contracts which address students' own attendance and academic goals for each school quarter. Students signing contracts know that their success will result in rewards of group trips to New York City or the ski slopes.

Students also know that staff will be available to help them meet the goals of their contract. Every morning local residents hired as VISTA volunteers call the schools in which students are enrolled to check their attendance. If students are not in school, staff call or visit families' homes immediately and contact students' parents to get students out of their house and into school. Workers also provide homework assistance every evening except Saturday to give students an extra boost toward improving their academic performance. Finally, staff help students learn to save money a little at a time and work with students to open a savings account to help pay for group trips. A similar program operated by the Rheedlen Foundation in New York City for chronic truants and nonattenders is proven effective: in nine and one-half months student participants made an average of one year's academic progress, and in those cases where children were total nonattenders, 80 percent began attending school regularly (Lefstein and Lipsitz, 1986).

Services in Support of Academic Improvement

On the middle grades level, a prevention approach may weave together academic, vocational, and counseling support services in such a way that they have a specific focus: to enhance student's chances for academic success and strengthen students' feelings of membership in the school. Middle grades students at risk of dropping out are often first identified as being behind their age-appropriate grade, but, as we have noted, such students often develop attendance and behavioral problems connected with their school failure. Successful programs on the middle level will address issues of skill development, attendance, and behavior in a comprehensive way, rather than each one in a narrow sense.

Middle grades students at risk of dropping out are often first identified as being behind their age-appropriate grade, but such students often develop attendance and behavioral problems connected with their school failure. Successful programs will address issues of skill development, attendance, and behavior in a comprehensive way, rather than each one in a narrow sense.

One example of such an approach to services is Boston's RECAP program. Designed to address the needs of middle school students with attendance and disciplinary problems who are two years behind their age-appropriate grade, the program requires enrolled students and their parents to sign a contract to meet specific academic, attendance, and behavioral standards. Students who meet the terms of the contract may be promoted once in mid-year and once at the end of the year, allowing them to catch up with their classmates. Students do not attend special programs but are expected to enroll in regular, mainstream classes. Case advocates, some of whom work in collaborating community agencies, monitor students' progress, offer academic remediation, and provide support services. Students also earn credits for community internships, a "career awareness" component appropriate to the needs of the age level which emphasizes exploration and diversity of experiences (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986).

Services to Improve School Climate and Student Discipline

The presence of school-based services in a school can provide the impetus for on-going attention to improving both school climate and school behavior. For example, peer mediation is one approach such services can adopt to reduce dropout and truancy rates and improve student behavior. Indeed, mediation is credited in some schools with cutting the suspension rate by 50 percent (Dullea, 1987; Stichter, 1986). Moreover, preliminary findings of a study of a peer mediation program indicate that one program implemented in the middle grades had a positive impact on overall school climate, resulting in a positive change of teacher perceptions of students' problem-solving ability and problem- solving interactions between staff and students. Violent disciplinary problems decreased, and the self-image of student mediators, chosen from all segments of the student body, improved. In addition, three quarters of the 81 student disputants reported they would have had a fight if they had not been referred for mediation (Stern and Van Slyck, 1986).

Mediation is a recent development in school improvement efforts, but it has been used enough so that guidelines for implementation are clear (Davis and Porter, 1987, Strichter, 1986). Students as young as fourth grade as well as teachers have successfully been trained as mediators, and mediation is tailor-made to schools with diverse racial populations (Davis and Porter, 1985). Moreover, students trained as mediators, in addition to having opportunities to improve their self-image through leadership responsibilities, experience opportunities for meaningful participation in their school and community within a well-defined structure and may develop skills in both concrete and abstract thinking. Mediation thus offers potential to meet a variety of developmental needs of young adolescents in the middle grades.

THE LIMITATIONS OF ADD-ON PROGRAMS

A review of the possible program components compiled in several surveys conveys the impression of schools as emerging multi-service centers for students at risk of dropping out. In many ways, this approach is both necessary and desirable. However, a reliance on school-based add-on programs, while an important first step, has some limitations which must be acknowledged.

For example in reviewing literature on treatment of juvenile delinquents, research seen as applicable to potential dropouts, Wehlage (1983b) concluded that programs that treat individual students as pathological are "relatively ineffective" (p. 326). Citing reviews of the literature concerning effects of social casework, psychotherapy, counseling, special education, and behavior modification, Wehlage notes that only a handful make a positive difference. He concludes that programs which treat the student as if (s)he were the problem have less chance of being effective than programs that attempt to influence the interactions and relations vulnerable students have with their schools.

When schools rely on add-on services to help students at risk of dropping out, they may gradually come to expect such services to "fix" troubled or deviant students so that they better conform to the school. Should this not happen, an adversarial relationship may develop between teaching and counseling staff. Moreover, dependence on services can let teachers off the hook if they can easily refer "problem students" to a service program that separates them from the mainstream classroom. A service approach, in other words, does not necessarily address the interactions between students and the school's institutional policies and staff, which Wehlage and others mention as a necessary focal point for helping vulnerable students.

In fact, reliance on a service strategy alone leaves school services themselves vulnerable to patterns and practices which often undermine the ability of many human service agencies, wherever their location, to address the needs of their constituents. School-based services will not necessarily be immune from such problems as waiting lists, mismatching of students and services, and failure of services to attend to the most needy and most difficult-to-help clients, all of which typify the day-to-day operations of many social service and family counseling agencies (Rein, 1970). Moreover, when school-based social service workers attempt to refer students out of school to services located in the community, they may find that such services are fragmented or have eligibility or jurisdictional requirements that present barriers to students' receiving services. The difficulties in relying solely on add-on programs become even more apparent when the number of students at risk of dropping out exceeds the service resources available to a school or when the problems of vulnerable students threaten to overwhelm and burn out limited service staff.

The real impact of services may depend to some extent on whether services are incorporated into school life or seen as programs outside of the mainstream. If services are seen only as responsive to students affected by crises such as school failure, suspension or expulsion, pregnancy, parenthood, or family problems, the effect of offering services may be to turn school into a treatment or clinical experience rather than an educational one. On the other hand, if services are integrated into the fabric of school life for all students, the educational integrity of the school may be more easily maintained.

School-based social services, like other single approaches, are not a panacea for dropping out, especially when they are introduced as special add-on services. However, because vulnerable students are at risk of dropping out for a number of reasons, such services can provide important support when needed. As schools collaborate with other community institutions to provide more services, they may increasingly take into account the "whole student" who has social as well as academic needs, and schools may become more open to working with needy students in new ways. They may also move closer to providing a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach which several researchers have described as characteristic of successful dropout prevention strategies (Cipollone, 1986; Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987).

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: CHANGING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS FOR VULNERABLE STUDENTS

While dropout prevention programs designed as add-ons must have the capacity to address the complex academic, behavioral, vocational, and social-emotional needs of vulnerable students, their ultimate objective must be to change the negative school-student interactions which often contribute to dropping out. A number of districts have begun to answer this need through the development of alternative programs, either in separate settings or as schools-within-schools, an approach recently endorsed by the Committee for Economic Development (1987). While such alternatives are most popular at the high school level, they are becoming increasingly more attractive at the middle grades level.

A 1982 survey directed by Mary Anne Raywid of Hofstra University's Project on Alternatives in Education reported that alternatives hold special promise for students at risk. According to survey findings, basic skills are emphasized in most alternatives. Moreover, school attendance and student behavior improve in alternatives, successes derived in part from personalized student-teacher interaction and attention to human relationships and innovative instruction. Similar findings have since been echoed by other researchers who strongly emphasize that the climate of successful alternative programs is the all-important factor which promotes student success (Gold and Mann, 1982; Wehlage, 1983a, 1987). Programs described as successful incorporate special features associated with program administration and organization, teacher culture, student culture, and curriculum.

Essential Components of Effective Alternatives

What makes alternative programs different from add-on approaches is their attention to creating a total educational environment which both challenges and nurtures their students. For example, the environmental design approach focuses on developing positive interactions between students and program staff in surroundings which support student progress.

What makes alternative programs different from add-on approaches is their attention to creating a total educational environment which both challenges and nurtures their students. Indeed, based on her research, Mary Anne Raywid insists that alternatives which address only the academic or behavioral deficits of students ultimately become no more than remedial or punitive programs destined to fail (1985, 1987). By contrast, the environmental design approach focuses on developing positive interactions between students and program staff in surroundings which support student progress. It is this approach that holds greatest promise for vulnerable students. Eight components of this approach identified by Raywid include:

1. A personalized environment that generates a strong sense of loyalty and affiliation;
2. Voluntary program membership that acknowledges student and teacher preferences;
3. Variation of instructional pace, topics, and activity to sustain stimulation, motivation, and engagement;
4. Early and frequent academic success for real challenges to counter loss of confidence from previous failures;
5. Interdisciplinary curriculum organized around topics, issues, and problems to help students establish connections between their personal concerns and the public world;
6. Small group and individualized learning, including cooperative and interdependent activities, to balance whole class instruction;
7. Developmental learning (with a self-knowledge dimension) in greater proportion to academic learning than is typical of traditional education;
8. District support for staff to design different climates, curricula, and activities so that alternatives do not replicate the conditions for failure.

Strikingly, many of these components overlap the characteristics of successful middle schools identified by Lipsitz (1984). That parallel, along with the finding by Eileen Foley and others (1982, 1984, 1985) that too often students at risk of dropping out enter alternative programs at a point too late in their schooling to redress the harm already done, leads us to the conclusion that alternative education, when carefully designed to attend to students' needs for a challenging and nurturing learning environment and when implemented according to guidelines derived from successful programs, has an important place in a comprehensive dropout prevention approach in the middle grades. In designing such programs, educators must make every effort to ensure that students are not stigmatized by enrollment in the alternative. By the same token, the chances for success of such alternatives will increase to the extent that they are not planned as add-ons, designed to "fix" students who are then returned to the mainstream, but represent a genuine alternative model to the business-as-usual practices that put vulnerable students at risk of dropping out.

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Lessons of Alternative Education for Middle Grades Reform

Like add-ons, alternative programs alone are no panacea for every district's dropout problem. In districts where dropout rates are low, an alternative program, extra help, or special services may adequately address the needs of the relatively few students who become disengaged from the mainstream. However, in districts where the numbers of students dropping out actually exceed the numbers graduating, the lessons of alternative education point in another direction.

In such districts, we must apply our knowledge about what is effective in alternative settings to ways in which we organize our public schools. We believe this knowledge has particular relevance to the middle grades where large numbers of students begin to flounder. At this point, the normal needs of young adolescent students are especially well-matched to the distinctive features of alternative education. Indeed, the lessons of alternative programs can serve as a partial guide to school reform and revitalization of middle grades schools as a whole.

Organizational characteristics of successful alternative schools offer specific lessons for improving school holding power at the middle level. The small size of alternative schools translates into the "smallness-within-bigness" of teams or other units designed to personalize education for students. Teachers who assume counseling and administrative roles in addition to classroom responsibilities parallel teachers who assume diverse roles in their middle grades schools. And an experiential curriculum may translate into the developmentally-appropriate interdisciplinary learning activities and diverse instructional approaches which characterize successful middle grades classrooms.

Indeed, school districts which have operated separate successful middle level alternatives may introduce such reforms by reorganizing the alternative, not as a separate program, but as a school-within-a-school or an alternative team or cluster. Teachers on the alternative team may present an alternative which students and their parents can choose with the knowledge that the team will, indeed, involve them in a different approach to learning. Such an approach, however, must be based on a commitment to preserving the alternative's autonomy. In addition, expectations for the alternative must be clearly spelled out to everyone in the school so that others do not see it as a dumping ground for hard-to-teach students.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, REORGANIZATION, AND REVITALIZATION: IMPROVING SCHOOL HOLDING POWER FOR VULNERABLE STUDENTS

We have already noted that the failure of some schools to graduate even the majority of students suggests that it is schools themselves, not simply their vulnerable students, that may be in need of remediation and reform. We have also noted that in some districts the number of students who teeter on the brink of dropping out is so high that it becomes inconceivable for a school to provide enough add-on programs to meet the needs of all vulnerable students. For these reasons, we believe approaches which emphasize reform of school structure and climate must be included in any comprehensive dropout prevention effort in such districts. The middle grades are an appropriate point at which to initiate such efforts.

Changes in school structure are crucial to a school improvement effort that has as one goal the strengthening of school holding power for vulnerable students in the middle grades. Lipsitz (1984) for one stresses the need for a strong school infrastructure as an essential foundation for more specialized programs and emphasizes the need to look at the school's total functioning as a beginning step toward change. She points out:

> Excellent programs can be found in terrible schools. *It is possible that the accretion of good programs in weak school structures further weakens rather than strengthens schools* (emphasis added). Also, children attend schools, not individual programs. The nature of their school experience is not merely the sum of seven or eight individual periods, departments, or curricula. If schooling for young adolescents is to improve, the school must be the unit of change (p. 11).

While Lipsitz's work is not a study of dropout prevention, its detailed profiles of four successful schools for young adolescents signal a direction for reform for schools that want to improve their holding power for students at risk of dropping out. The schools Lipsitz describes have structures which enhance student performance: students score at the district mean on standardized test scores, absentee rates are no higher than 8.0, suspension rates are below the national average of 4.2, and incidence of vandalism and victimization is low. Clearly these schools are pursuing practices which enhance student success, promote membership and belonging, and maximize inclusion of all students.

Changes in school climate are a second aspect of a school improvement effort. Again, literature on effective middle grades schools along with research on alternative programs offer guidance. Lipsitz (1984) and Fruchter (1986) describe successful schools for young adolescents in which a sense of order prevails alongside a sense of joy. In these schools, order is based on students' and teachers' liking one another and on their experiencing their school as a community of learners. Discipline is not confused with punishment. Rather, discipline emerges from the ownership students and staff feel for the practices, norms, and expectations that govern relations among all.

Gathering Data on School Holding Power in the Middle Grades

Just as individual schools and school districts may develop procedures to identify students at risk of dropping out, districts can also develop criteria to identify schools with weak holding power based on what is known about the interaction between vulnerable students and their schools. At the middle grades level, schools' holding power is reflected in their non-promotion, suspension, and attendance rates. While these rates can be used as a means of counting numbers of vulnerable students, they can also be used to pinpoint school-based policies and practices that may require review. Districts reviewing such information by race allow for even richer analysis of schools' holding power. Since non-promotion, suspension, and attendance patterns vary widely from school to school in a district, such an approach is critical to assessing individual schools' strenghths and weaknesses and designing improvement strategies tailored to each school's profile.

At the middle grades level, schools' holding power is reflected in their non-promotion, suspension, and attendance rates. While these rates can be used as a means of counting numbers of vulnerable students, they can also be used to pinpoint school-based policies and practices that may require review.

Such data is essential to beginning a school review process and may offer information previously ignored by district officials and school staff. In our experience, even staff members most familiar with their school may be surprised to learn that their perception of the school's pattern of practice is not borne out by statistics. Such data is also a beginning point for assessing school climate. High non-promotion rates, for example, suggest a school in which student failure is the dominant norm; high suspension rates may indicate a climate of exclusion; and poor attendance rates are a powerful symptom of a climate that feeds alienation.

Assessing School Climate, Effectiveness, and Responsiveness

However, data alone provides only a beginning, although essential, understanding of school climate. Broadening this understanding requires additional efforts, and a number of researchers and practitioners throughout the country have begun to develop instruments to assess school climate. Such instruments, when carefully selected, can provide important information for school improvement which, in turn, can strengthen dropout prevention efforts.

For example, the Effective School Battery developed by The Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools is a relatively reliable and valid tool to help schools assess school climate, morale, intergroup relations, and instructional approaches. This instrument appears to have particular relevance to dropout prevention issues in that it assesses student attachment to school. A second instrument, the School Assessment Survey developed by Research for Better Schools in Philadelphia, is designed to help teachers assess perceptions of nine school organizational dimensions, identify strengths and weaknesses, and set priorities. A review of the survey by researchers suggests it is the best instrument available for diagnosing the need for team-building kinds of organizational development interventions and in evaluating such interventions (Gottfredson, *et al.*, 1986).

A third promising approach to school assessment has been developed for use statewide in Connecticut, where the State Department of Education and the Connecticut Department of Children and Youth Services have jointly embarked on a school effectiveness project which emphasizes the use of schoolwide assessments. The project uses three instruments to assess student, faculty, and parent attitudes toward their school with the goal of improving school effectiveness. Practitioners who have used this approach report important results in terms of strengthening school leadership, helping teachers identify more effective instructional approaches, and involving parents to a greater degree in their children's education. In a review of school assessment instruments, researchers at The Johns Hopkins University noted that strengths of the Connecticut project include its firm grounding in research on effective schools and its inclusion of students in the process (Gottfredson, *et al.*, 1986).

Finally, the Center for Early Adolescence has developed an approach specifically designed for use in the middle grades, the Middle Grades Assessment Program (Dorman, 1984). Designed as a research-based, participatory planning tool for middle level schools, it does not specifically address dropout prevention. However, in the process of implementing the Middle Grades Assessment Program (MGAP) model, many schools have found that the effort results in improving student behavior, raising students' academic performance, and strengthening school pride among a broad range of students (Dorman, 1987). Indeed, the inclusion of students themselves in the assessment process encourages and validates student roles in planning and decision-making. Such results suggest the potential of the process for guiding intervention efforts and improving the holding power of middle level schools for all students and, in particular, for students at risk of dropping out.

We predict that school improvement as part of a dropout prevention process will increasingly work itself into both literature and practice. Well-designed studies recently published indicate that program components designed to promote organizational change in schools may be more effective than components focusing on treatment of students in reaching their goals.

Of the schools we know of that have used such approaches, many have found that the process triggers a long-range institutional reform effort stretching over several years and involving members from all sectors of the school community. Schools embarking on such efforts discover first-hand the benefits of including all teachers in decision-making regarding their students. Consequently, the experience becomes an experience in staff development, the rewards of which continue beyond the life of the immediate assessment.

While most of the dropout literature focuses on dropout prevention programs, we predict that school improvement as part of a dropout prevention process will increasingly work itself into both literature and practice. Cipollone (1986) cites well-designed studies recently published which indicate that program components designed to promote organizational change in schools may be more effective than components focusing on treatment of students in reaching their goals. Natriello (1987) also suggests that the next wave of school reform should include a serious re-examination and restructuring of schools to meet the needs of disadvantaged students more effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

As middle grades schools prepare to embark on dropout prevention efforts, they may want to seek direction from existing efforts, most of which exist on the high school level. While existing efforts will provide some guidance, they may have limited applicability in the middle grades for several reasons. First, as we have noted, new efforts have little to go on by way of fool-proof program models on any level. Lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of specific programs leaves policy makers, educators, and dropout prevention program developers with few guidelines to distinguish between promising and proven programs. Moreover, Cipollone (1986) notes that because schools and communities vary so much, it is difficult to generalize from one program's success to another.

If this lack of guidance presents hurdles in developing programs for high school students, it presents additional problems for those designing programs on the middle level where even fewer efforts have been tried and evaluated. Consequently, we draw our suggestions for middle grades dropout prevention strategies from two sources. First, we draw from our synthesis of literature on effective schools, dropout prevention, early adolescent development, and middle grades schools. Second, we rely on own experience in working with schools at the middle level. We expect middle level dropout prevention strategies to be thoroughly grounded in an understanding of the developmental needs of young adolescent students. Within this developmental framework, such efforts should strengthen instructional programs and holding power to trigger measurable improvement in student achievement and improve students' chances for promotion. Such approaches should also strengthen school climate and promote students' sense of membership in their schools measured by improvement in student attendance and a decline in suspension rates. Schools' decisions related to program and policy development should enhance these outcomes.

Our review of the literature indicates that to meet these goals, schools must initiate developmentally-appropriate approaches within each of four major dropout prevention components in such a way as to weave together all approaches into a comprehensive, coherent strategy. Specific aspects of such a strategy would include:

1. An academic component to strengthen curriculum and instruction while improving student skills;
2. An experiential career awareness component to raise students' aspirations and motivation;
3. A counseling/social service component in collaboration with community-based agencies to provide support for students coping with both crisis situations and normal developmental concerns;
4. A school improvement component, focusing on structural reform and institutional revitalization to strengthen the learning environment of the school for both students and adults.

We envision these components as comprising a comprehensive strategy which, overall, is directed toward meeting the broad goals of improving schools' holding power, enhancing student achievement, and promoting a sense of membership of all students in the school. While each component may include approaches designed to help and support students, it should also include approaches which focus on the interactions between students and their school. Since different schools present different needs, each school will develop a strategy unique to its strengths and weaknesses, matching approaches within each component to the needs both of their school and of the students in their school. Appropriate matching will depend on the school's honest assessment of its needs and review of past patterns of attendance, achievement, non-promotion, and suspension.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

Whatever the cluster of approaches a school chooses to adopt, we suggest seven basic principles which should guide the direction of any dropout prevention efforts in the middle grades.

1. In schools with large numbers of vulnerable students, dropout prevention strategies should focus primarily on changing school practices and policies that put students at risk.
2. Dropout prevention programs should focus on broadening and diversifying opportunities in the educational mainstream so that students with a variety of learning styles, paces, and needs can experience success.
3. Dropout prevention strategies should be developed on a school-by-school basis with the involvement of teachers, parents, students, administrative staff and community workers at that school.
4. Dropout prevention strategies at the middle grades level must take into account the normal developmental needs of young adolescents.
5. Dropout prevention strategies should acknowledge the broad cultural diversity and richness of the student population.
6. Dropout prevention strategies should include parents in meaningful roles.
7. Dropout prevention strategies should actively collaborate with community-based human service agencies to provide services for students at risk in middle schools and to expand programs offered to all students.

These principles underscore the need for dropout prevention approaches which couple specific programs with a broad school improvement process. In proposing them, we also hope to stimulate ways of thinking about dropout prevention that include both attention to individual students at risk as well as a focus on the strength of the school organization at risk in middle schools and to expand programs offered to all students.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL HOLDING POWER AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Our review of the literature persuades us that reversing school dropout rates requires efforts involving all segments of the school community at the school building level. Indeed, we believe that individual schools can make many positive changes through a process which engages administrators, teachers, support staff, students, and parents. When community-based actors—foundations, social service agencies, local universities, and businesses—join as partners, the school can engage in a more comprehensive strategy.

This is not to say that support for dropout prevention is not critical at the district level. Dropout prevention is a political issue, requiring support from high-level decision-makers within the district. We believe that the more elected officials publicly acknowledge the problem and endorse action, the greater will be the momentum for change. For example, school-based staff will need rewards from their superiors for dropout prevention efforts which will require self-assessment, open appraisal of strengths and weaknesses, and building-level innovations. Endorsement from top officials for building change is thus essential in moving the effort forward in an atmosphere free of blaming and committed to problem-solving.

Decision-makers on school boards and within school departments must engage in the dropout prevention process by reviewing and revising district-wide policies that are developmentally and educationally hazardous and that contribute to dropping out. In our view, it is crucial for districts with large numbers of dropouts to communicate consistent messages about the need to prevent early school leaving at all levels and provide the means needed to bring about such change. Equally critical is the need for districts to adopt policies that facilitate school-based efforts to strengthen holding power by promoting student success and membership in the school.

Finally, state-level education reforms must also support school improvement change at the building level. Indeed, recognition of the need to link state policy reforms with school-site restructuring is the impetus for collaboration between the Education Commission of the States and the Coalition of Essential Schools, an initiative now in the planning stages. This collaboration will result in efforts to ensure that state and district decision-makers develop policies to support school-based changes.

CHANGE AT THE SCHOOL-SITE LEVEL

As important as such efforts are, we believe that the most significant changes to benefit vulnerable middle grades students and improve schools' holding power can and must occur at each individual school. Consequently, we suggest a three-stage approach designed to work at the building level. The process we propose requires the guidance and direction of a school-site school improvement/dropout prevention planning committee. We suggest this strategy as a way of ensuring a core group of participants committed to the broad goals of improving the school's holding power and addressing specific needs of students at risk of dropping out.

In our discussion of dropout prevention strategies, we have noted the role of individual teachers or principals in developing innovative approaches to help vulnerable students. We envision a process which, through a leadership planning group, draws on the talents of such individuals and provides a way to institutionalize their efforts. We also envision a process which involves parents and students in meaningful roles in dropout prevention efforts.

The strategy we propose recognizes that school-based changes come about slowly over time. Consequently, such an effort requires not only sustained leadership but also staff stability and a commitment to acknowledge and wrestle with school-based barriers to change. Such barriers may range from inadequate teacher training to bureaucratic or contract constraints. Such barriers can be overcome, but they do not disappear overnight.

While the approach we suggest seems reasonable to us, we also emphasize that it is not a proven strategy. Middle grades schools engaged in a school improvement/dropout prevention process are cutting new ground. We recognize that the process we outline is as challenging as it is comprehensive and will require persistence, patience, and vision. We urge middle grades schools undertaking such a strategy to document their efforts carefully so other schools can benefit from their experience.

Initial Stage: Review, Assessment, and Planning for a School Improvement/Dropout Prevention Process

(Nine Months–One Year)

STEP 1: Establishing a school improvement/dropout prevention planning committee at the building level

School improvement and dropout prevention require collaboration both within the school building and between the school and the community—parents, community-based organizations, and higher education or business partners. To guide such an effort, each school needs a committee organized at the building level with leadership from the school administration. While the core of the planning group should be made up of individuals directly involved with the school on a daily basis, it is essential to include others who have less investment in the school's day-to-day operation and can provide a more independent perspective on the school. The committee should be large enough to include representation from all sectors of the school community, including students, but small enough to be able to function as a working group.

While such a committee will work at the building level, the group should seek and receive the endorsement of policy-makers at the district level. Indeed, individual school-based committees should establish on-going communication with educational decision-makers and other actors in the community, both to win their initial support and to provide them with information about school goals. Such support will be helpful as schools seek statistical data and resources to carry out this strategy. For example, while we believe this process can be implemented within each school, many schools could benefit from support and technical assistance from someone outside the school who has skills in group process, team-building, consensus decision-making, and group planning.

Individual school-based committees should establish on-going communication with educational decision-makers and other actors in the community, both to win their initial support and to provide them with information about school goals.

STEP 2: Developing a conceptual framework for action

The goal of the committee at this stage should be to gather information to establish a commonly shared knowledge-base related to the broad goals of school improvement and dropout prevention at the middle level. Committee members should review literature on students at risk of dropping out with a focus on the interactions between vulnerable students, including poor and minority students, and the school as a organization. Such a review should also include exposure to organizational and programmatic interventions and could include site visits to other schools or meetings with staff in community-based organizations offering services to students at risk.

Committee members should also review literature on developmental issues for young adolescents, successful middle grades schools, school climate improvement, and structural reform of schools. Committees might also choose to read or conduct seminars on topics of specific relevance to their school or student population such as a neighborhood history, demographic or social profile, an overview of existing social services, or needs of newly-arrived immigrant students. During this stage, it is essential that committee members begin to share their research efforts and findings with other school staff, including teachers, specialists, support staff, and parents. Information-focused activities could take the form of newsletters, distribution of articles, department staff meetings, or parent events. Wide distribution of new information is essential to establish an open climate for change.

STEP 3: Assessing the school's holding power, school climate, academic effectiveness, and "match" with developmental needs of young adolescents

Because schools have their own distinctive organizational climates as well as widely varying rates of student academic performance, attendance, and suspension, school improvement and dropout prevention strategies will reflect each school's unique profile and culture.

Because schools have their own distinctive organizational climates as well as widely varying rates of student academic performance, attendance, and suspension, school improvement and dropout prevention strategies will reflect each school's unique profile and culture. As a first step, schools should develop a statistical profile, preferably reflecting a three-year period and disaggregated by race, to determine trends in school performance and to identify specific students most at risk. Committee members should compare school statistics with those reflecting the district mean for the following:

a. Promotion rates for the school;

b. Attendance rates and numbers of students absent 15 to 20 percent of the time; 20 to 50 percent of the time; more than 50 percent of the time;

c. Rates based on numbers of suspensions and numbers of students suspended each year;

d. A review of district and school-based attendance, promotion, and discipline policies to determine in what ways these policies might contribute to lowering achievement, discouraging attendance, or encouraging disruption or discipline problems.

Middle grades schools which have gathered this information have a rough measure of their holding power. Based on the cut-off criteria set by Lipsitz in ***Successful Schools for Young Adolescents***, reasonable standards for schools with strong holding power are a 92 percent attendance rate; a 95 percent promotion rate; and less than five suspensions for every hundred students recorded yearly. School-based data are essential to guide a school-site planning committee in setting measurable goals for change and in selecting and designing meaningful approaches to reduce the risk of dropping out for vulnerable students. Again, we suggest that planning committees share their findings with all others involved in the school to provide a basis for reflection on these data and discussion of strategies for change.

Based on the cut-off criteria set by Lipsitz, reasonable standards for schools with strong holding power are a 92 percent attendance rate; a 95 percent promotion rate; and less than five suspensions for every hundred students recorded yearly.

The second component of the assessment should take place simultaneously with the gathering of the statistical data listed above, lasting over a period of two to four months. To form a full picture of the school, committee members also need to understand the school's organizational culture, especially the ways in which the norms of the culture complement and enhance the academic effectiveness and security of the school and the developmental needs of the young adolescent students. In particular, information about staff, student, and parent perspectives, assumptions, and expectations for students provide an important basis from which to discuss possible approaches to intervention.

In our review of school assessment tools, we have mentioned several approaches which can help schools identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school climate. Each tool had advantages and disadvantages in terms of costs, staff time required, involvement of all sectors of the school community, reliability, and validity. All are research-based and all can be implemented without consultants. The results of the assessment process combined with a review of school statistics can provide a school-based planning committee with baseline data that suggest how school improvement and dropout prevention efforts in that school could proceed.

STEP 4: Planning interventions

During the initial stage, committees should use the information gathered to plan interventions in three areas. First, a pilot program should be designed to support students at risk of dropping out. Second, on-going staff development should be planned to energize faculty on behalf of school improvement efforts. Third, school policies and practices should be reviewed to help move the school toward a more orderly, caring climate.

These areas are intimately related. The design of services for students most at risk of dropping out—students, for example, with severe attendance or academic needs—should be considered as an effort which pilots innovative teaching approaches, learning activities, styles of adult-student interaction, or methods of conflict resolution that will be applied at a later stage to the entire school community. On-going staff development may focus on adolescent development or training in student involvement circles and problem-solving skills, which in turn may strengthen classroom climate and reduce the need for punitive suspension practices.

While each committee should develop its own distinctive response, the pilot program should strive to include the following characteristics, designed to address the needs of vulnerable students:

- A mainstream orientation so that students are not stigmatized or pulled out into a separate, in-school setting;
- An immediate, personalized, and non-punitive approach to absences and discipline which engages community resources in dealing with family or personal problems interfering with attendance or behavior. We suggest that schools pay attention to attendance and discipline patterns as a first step in reconnecting with disengaged students. Schools cannot teach students who do not attend or have been suspended from school. However, once students are in school, they need special attention to re-engage and renew their commitment and develop a sense of membership in their school;
- Attention to remediation of basic reading and math skills, employing methods different from those that have already failed to help such students and using what is known about effective approaches to re-teaching these skills;
- Assurance that every student targeted for support services knows that at least one adult in the school cares about him or her.

Second, we recommend that initial efforts focus on on-going consultation and training for all staff on issues related to early adolescent development, improving school climate, and working with students at risk. Such training is essential to provide a framework for understanding the needs of young adolescents, to introduce staff to successful approaches to working with vulnerable youth, and to address staff resistance to change. Such staff development efforts should emerge from a survey of preferences and needs of staff or from collaborative arrangement with a community-based organization and could include parents.

We recommend that initial efforts focus on on-going consultation and training for all staff on issues related to early adolescent development, improving school climate, and working with students at risk. Such training is essential to provide a framework for understanding the needs of young adolescents, to introduce staff to successful approaches to working with vulnerable youth, and to address staff resistance to change.

Third, planning committees should recommend changes in school policy or practice to bring about improvements in school climate and holding power. We have described a number of choices which schools can make to implement such improvements. These efforts should focus on procedures related to attendance, promotion, and discipline, the quality of relationships between students and teachers and among students, and opportunities for students to make meaningful contributions to the life of the school. The plan developed should be based on an understanding of how current policy or practice undermines student engagement and how the proposed change could create a more inclusive climate where all individuals in the community are highly valued.

The plan for change should include:

- Analysis of current school practices and structure in light of dropout prevention and developmental needs of young adolescents;
- Description of suggested changes to improve school climate and identification of measurable outcomes;
- Identification of barriers to implementing that change;
- Actions needed to reduce barriers to change;
- Sources of support for proposed change;
- Action steps necessary to implement change.

As planning committees develop plans for change, they must necessarily seek information from school staff that allows them to assess the school's readiness for change, anticipate resistance, and address potential problems. This should provide the group with an opportunity to establish consensus for the broader goals of the dropout prevention effort among all members of the school community.

Intermediate Stage: Implementing Initial Stage Plans; Planning and Implementing Structural, Curricular, and Instructional Reforms

(Two–Five Years)

STEP 1: Implementing school climate changes and a pilot program for at-risk students

The focus of the school-based improvement and dropout prevention process during the intermediate stage is the implementation of both the effort to improve school climate and the pilot program. During this stage, roles must be clearly defined and responsibilities assigned. Moreover, objectives for both components should be defined to allow for measuring the impact of change. The committee should take care to communicate these objectives to the entire school in terms of the broad goals for school improvement and dropout prevention.

STEP 2: Planning and implementing structural reforms

In selecting a direction for structural reform, planning committees should be guided by the principle of "smallness-within-bigness" as a salient characteristic of effective schools for young adolescents. Committees should give priority to efforts which will, first, establish smaller units within the school and, second, build toward effective functioning of these units. Interdisciplinary teams, schools-within-schools, houses, departments, and even homerooms can be structural reflections of this principle. For example, fully functioning teams are essential prerequisites for other features of successful middle grades education including interdisciplinary curriculum, flexible block scheduling, and teacher-based guidance.

In selecting a direction for structural reform, planning committees should be guided by the principle of "smallness-within-bigness" as a salient characteristic of effective schools for young adolescents. Committees should give priority to efforts which will, first, establish smaller units within the school and, second, build toward effective functioning of these units.

In some cases, where schools may already have embryonic teams, this process can help move teachers from discussions of housekeeping matters, bus schedules, and cafeteria duty to discussions of individual student needs, curriculum, and instruction. In other schools, however, staff may move more slowly away from a departmentalized organization. These schools can take interim steps toward encouraging smaller units within the school, including setting regular, formal meeting times for grade level teachers, arriving at a grade level consensus on expectations and rules, or setting up a drop-in center for each grade to replace an existing "math hall."

We recognize that movement toward team structures is a significant and challenging step for most schools. We also believe that the importance of this step justifies on-going technical assistance and training from district office staff in such skills as team-building, consensus decision-making, and leadership development. Teams do not spring up as fully operational units but rather move little by little toward increased levels of cooperation..

As teams do develop, they may, over several years, take on increasing levels of responsibility and cohesiveness. School improvement committees may find it useful to keep in mind the following guidelines defined by middle grades educator Nancy Doda as keys to successful team organization:[1]

- Students assigned to each team should include students at all levels of learning;
- Team planning time should be scheduled once a week at a minimum and, preferably, every day;
- Team planning space should facilitate communication and allow teachers to work together as a team;
- Team leadership should be identified to represent the team at team-administrator meetings;
- Team areas should be established within school space to encourage cohesiveness and a sense of identification of students with their team;
- All students and staff on each team should gather regularly to develop a sense of community and group cohesiveness;
- Each team should have autonomy and flexibility in establishing routines and rules;
- Teams should participate in a clearly defined team-administrator decision-making mechanism;
- Budgets and supplies should be decentralized to allow for greater autonomy and control by teams;
- Specialists should be attached to each team to facilitate communication and allow for regular, structured access to planning and discussion about students and curricular issues.

In our judgment, a focus on establishing smallness-within-bigness, whether through teams or through other mechanisms, is an appropriate first step in a school reform process. When committees choose to focus on teaming as a means of structural reform, they should select objectives that make sense to school staff and that can be seen as steps toward building fully functioning teams.

The full transition to school structures based on effective teams may take several years. An on-going staff development program that integrates learning, practice, and feedback will increase the likelihood for successful implementation.

Again we emphasize that the full transition to school structures based on effective teams may take several years. Consequently, school improvement committees need to communicate to all staff that initial steps are selected as part of a long-range process, the final phase of which may be interdisciplinary instruction. As part of this process, an on-going staff development program that integrates learning, practice, and feedback will increase the likelihood for successful implementation.

While we encourage committees to initiate steps leading toward the development of teams as part of this stage, some groups may want to select other approaches to reform of school structure and roles, including some mentioned in other sections of this report. None of the efforts suggested is meant to be prescriptive. In fact, the focus which each committee selects for reform should emerge from the findings of the school's assessment and reflect the individual needs of each school.

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[1] These characteristics of successful middle grades teams were included by Nancy Doda in remarks at the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) annual conference, Hyannis, Massachusetts, March 23, 1987.

STEP 3: Planning and implementing selected changes in curriculum and instruction

We suggest two simultaneous approaches to extending changes in school structure to changes in curriculum and classroom instruction. First, we suggest the school improvement committee provide direction for teams or smaller units to discuss and reach consensus about the following issues which, when addressed can enhance instruction for all students as well as for students at risk of dropping out:

- Consistent instructional goals to reflect common expectations for students touching on everything from heading of papers to team rules.
- Scheduling decisions designed to allow for time blocks long enough to include field trips, complicated science experiments, or special events. Such scheduling may vary from week to week depending on decisions teachers reach during common planning time.
- Needs of individual students who may consistently need help.
- Team interdisciplinary instruction. (We have intentionally placed this component last on the list because it is the most difficult to develop, requires the greatest amount of planning time, and is best introduced after teachers have developed a history of working with each other.)

Second, we suggest a school-wide focus on aligning curriculum with the real academic needs of students and on improving the quality of instruction. This effort will probably be spearheaded by the principal and team leaders, and may include attention to the following:

- The quality of classroom teaching and diversity of teaching methods through a comprehensive staff development program that integrates training, practice, feedback, and refinement. Such an approach should focus on establishing shared positive expectations for all students, improving teachers' ability to diagnose individual learning needs, and strengthening teachers' skills in providing students with immediate feedback.
- Instruction for all students in remedial or developmental reading.
- Upgrading mathematics curriculum and instruction for all students, emphasizing computation skills, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and the relevance of math to students' present and future lives.
- Development of thematic curricular units which address students' needs for "real knowledge" as distinct from information to be tested on standardized tests.

We suggest a school-wide focus on aligning curriculum with the real academic needs of students and on improving the quality of instruction. This effort will probably be spearheaded by the principal and team leaders.

Changes in curriculum and instruction will be shaped largely by each school's own assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. In schools where teams are already in place and basic skills are improving, schools may prefer to plan and implement such curricular changes as community-based internships for credit, an activity period, or multi-cultural learning. Instructional changes may focus on the introduction of cooperative learning activities or computer-assisted instruction.

While we make suggestions here, we also emphasize that school-site planning groups will operate best when they themselves have autonomy and flexibility. This does not imply that schools will operate without accountability. No school can be so independent as to operate without regard for existing laws, regulations, district requirements, and, ultimately, the public. But within the existing framework, decisions regarding conditions of teaching and learning can best be addressed by schools themselves.

Moreover, these planning groups must continue to receive and consider carefully information on an on-going basis, both about the record of their own school and about state-of-the art educational practice. Review of such data provides schools with tools for self-monitoring and on-going assessment. We encourage groups to seek information about the current status of middle grades education from a variety of sources including visits to other sites to observe other schools' practices, guest speakers, discussions with others in the community who work with students at risk, educational literature, and conferences. In the process of gathering information, these groups will begin to build a framework for better informed discussions and can use their autonomy to best advantage.

STEP 4: Planning institutional linkages between pilot programs and the regular program.

In the middle grades, school reforms must broaden rather than narrow the curriculum, expand opportunities for student success, and build the school as a community which attends to individual differences. Reform should result in improving achievement, attendance, and behavior for all students in the school as well as for vulnerable students.

A strong connection between school reform efforts and programs for vulnerable students is crucial. In the middle grades, school reforms must broaden rather than narrow the curriculum, expand opportunities for student success, and build the school as a community which attends to individual differences. Reform should result in improving achievement, attendance, and behavior for all students in the school as well as for vulnerable students.

The reform process must also facilitate the translation of successful aspects of the pilot program for at risk students into the mainstream so that all students can benefit. For example, a cross-age tutoring program engaging vulnerable students as tutors which has positive impact on the attendance and achievement of those students may be offered as an elective course for all students or may suggest innovative cooperative learning activities that can be introduced as part of the regular curriculum. In a similar vein, a mediation program in which vulnerable students participate as mediators and improve their behavior and attendance can suggest a curriculum on leadership skills and conflict resolution for all students. Community internships as part of an individualized contract allowing overage-for-grade students to earn credits for promotion can also become part of the school-wide curriculum.

The transition of successful aspects of a pilot program to the school's mainstream will require careful planning. The pilot program itself must be evaluated, and the committee must be open to redesigning the approach if necessary. Moreover, successful implementation will require the committee to educate others in the school about the benefits of the approach for all students.

On-Going, Long-Range Steps: Establishing Evaluation and Change as an On-Going Process

As schools implement changes, on-going monitoring and evaluation of programs is essential. As committees gather quantitive, qualitative, and anecdotal data on outcomes, they should use the information to refine the pilot program or redirect interventions in school structure or practices. In this way, we hope the evaluation mechanism and process can be institutionalized so as to give direction to continuing improvement efforts and inform the community of successes and failures. We hope, too, that commitment to such a process can help each school move from a rigid, static institution to a self-renewing community of teachers and learners and in doing so, can make the best public education has to offer young adolescents more widely available to the most vulnerable students.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

As we become increasingly aware of the consequences of dropping out, both for individual students who abandon school and for society as a whole, the more we realize how the problem of early school leaving is enmeshed with other social concerns. The more we consider the problem and understand its links to associated issues of poverty, unemployment, delinquency, and social deprivation, the more the problem begins to blur, moving in and out of focus according to the lens through which we view it. As we understand the problem as an issue complicated by many factors, the more we understand the need for complex solutions and the more vulnerable we are to being overwhelmed.

But to young people who drop out, the problem is not so complex. Students tell us they leave because they do not like school. They tell us that they do not get along with their teachers and that they find school rules unfair and inconsistent. Many students who drop out are poor and do leave school early to work. Many are entangled in social, emotional, and health problems. But most students enter tenth grade fully expecting to graduate, and many leave school—the major institutional touchstone in the lives of our young people—because from their perspective school is less rewarding than the alternatives they see for themselves.

We take these young people at their word, and we take their complaints seriously. These students are our consumers of public education. Our schools are the product they use, and the product is not addressing the needs of many of our most vulnerable young people at a time when these students need schools the most.

In the middle grades, students most at risk begin to show signs they may drop out of school. Overage for their grade, their basic skills lag, and their attendance drops. Rather than admit their inadequacies, they misbehave. Before it is too late for these students, we must focus our efforts at this level to prevent their slide into failure, alienation, and exclusion that precedes dropping out.

We believe that serious dropout prevention efforts require some change in our schools, and we have made a case for school change at the middle level as a major droput prevention strategy. In the middle grades, students most at risk begin to show signs they may drop out of school. Overage for their grade, their basic skills lag, and their attendance drops. Rather than admit their inadequacies, they misbehave. Before it is too late for these students, we must focus our efforts at this level to prevent their slide into failure, alienation, and exclusion that precedes dropping out.

Our blueprint for a dropout prevention approach at the middle level has two components. Because students at risk in the middle grades have special problems, we have made a case for add-on programs directed specifically toward those whose educational or social needs put them at risk of dropping out. We have described a number of academic, vocationally-oriented, and social service efforts that can help such students. We suggest that such programs can provide students with support to meet school requirements and expectations and can personalize and individualize the school experience for these students.

But we also insist that schools can not continue to do business as usual and expect to hold on to and improve the skills of vulnerable students. We have identified a number of school practices related to student achievement, attendance, and behavior which undermine academic success and developmental progress and convey messages to students that they do not belong in the educational mainstream. We believe schools must abandon these practices as part of a comprehensive dropout prevention strategy.

Middle grades students at risk, while having special problems, also have developmental needs similar to all young adolescents. At the middle level, traditional structures and organizational arrangements that fail to address the normal developmental needs of this age group further contribute to student disengagement. We have described how existing arrangements can and must be changed to benefit not just students at risk but all students. Moreover, we can reform practices that harm vulnerable students by substituting alternatives to improve student achievement and include all students in full membership in the school. We have outlined a number of such alternatives in this report.

The renewed focus of public attention on school dropouts represents a unique opportunity for meaningful school reform in middle grades schools in order to reach vulnerable students before they leave school. The reforms we suggest do not represent an attempt to get tougher with students who are falling behind. They do represent a view that our school and community leaders can make more intelligent choices to keep vulnerable students engaged in school. In our effort to reach the most vulnerable students in the middle grades, we can create schools which offer both challenging and nurturing learning environments, for all young adolescent students, and for the most vulnerable students in particular.

The reforms we suggest do not represent an attempt to get tougher with students who are falling behind. They do represent a view that our school and community leaders can make more intelligent choices to keep vulnerable students engaged in school.

Checklist for Dropout Prevention in the Middle Grades

You may want to use this checklist to stimulate thinking among teachers, administrators, principals, students and community members involved in your school about your school's dropout prevention efforts. You can consider whether your school's dropout prevention strategy:

1.___ Modifies punitive or exclusionary practices or policies that undermine the academic success or school membership of vulnerable students:
    ___ Attendance;
    ___ Non-Promotion;
    ___ Suspension.

2.___ Broadens and diversifies opportunities for student success in the educational mainstream, especially through strengthening classroom teaching and learning.

3.___ Involves teachers, parents, students, administrative staff, and community members.

4.___ Takes into account the normal developmental needs of young adolescents for:
    ___ Bridging the gap between concrete and abstract thinking;
    ___ Competence and achievement;
    ___ Opportunities for self-definition;
    ___ Interaction with peers and adults;
    ___ Diversity of learning activities;
    ___ Participation in school and community life;
    ___ Structure and limits;
    ___ Physical activity.

5.___ Acknowledges broad cultural diversity and richness of the student population.

6.___ Includes parents in meaningful roles.

7.___ Collaborates with community-based human service organizations.

1. Dropouts and their Schools: Defining A Focus for Intervention

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